

# Langtang & Helambu

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Trekking past bamboo groves, monsoon wildflowers or springtime rhododendron blooms on the **Langtang Valley** trek (p211)
- Hiking through Swiss-style alpine pastures to the foot of huge glaciers at **Langshisha Kharka** (p215)
- Savouring a hot cinnamon roll or an alfresco plate of 'nak' cheese while admiring the views of 7246m Langtang Lirung at **Kyanjin Gumpa** (p213)
- Climbing to the viewpoints atop **Kyanjin Ri** (p214) or **Tsergo Ri** (p214) for a spectacular day hike from Kyanjin Gumpa
- Gazing down on the holy lakes of **Gosainkund** (p221), as a 150km line of Himalayan peaks frames the horizon behind

The mountains north of Kathmandu offer a great range of trekking choices, all within a day's drive of the capital. The major areas are the Langtang Valley, the sacred alpine lakes of Gosainkund and the rolling Sherpa farmland of Helambu, and these can be combined in many different ways to make a trek lasting from seven to 16 days.

The Langtang Valley trek follows the river upstream through forests of pine, bamboo and rhododendron, ascending through pastures to arrive at the alpine meadows of Kyanjin Gumpa, where you'll get outstanding mountain views just a stone's throw from the Tibetan border.

The Gosainkund trek climbs more steeply through farmland and above the treeline up an alpine ridge that offers a huge Himalayan panorama, to reach a rocky bowl studded with sacred high-altitude lakes. From Gosainkund you can continue over the high Laurebina La and walk all the way back to the Kathmandu Valley, offering a satisfying sense of journey.

Helambu lacks the mountain views of Langtang and Gosainkund but offers a closer look at village life and is a fine winter or cultural trek. None of the treks are particularly easy, with a surprising amount of steep climbs and stiff descents, often through deep forests or across glacial moraines.

The good news is that Langtang and Helambu are logistically easy – no special permits, few altitude hassles, decent teahouses and no flights, just long bus rides. If you only have a week or are looking for a teahouse trek away from the crowds of the Annapurna and Everest regions, they're excellent choices.



## ENVIRONMENT

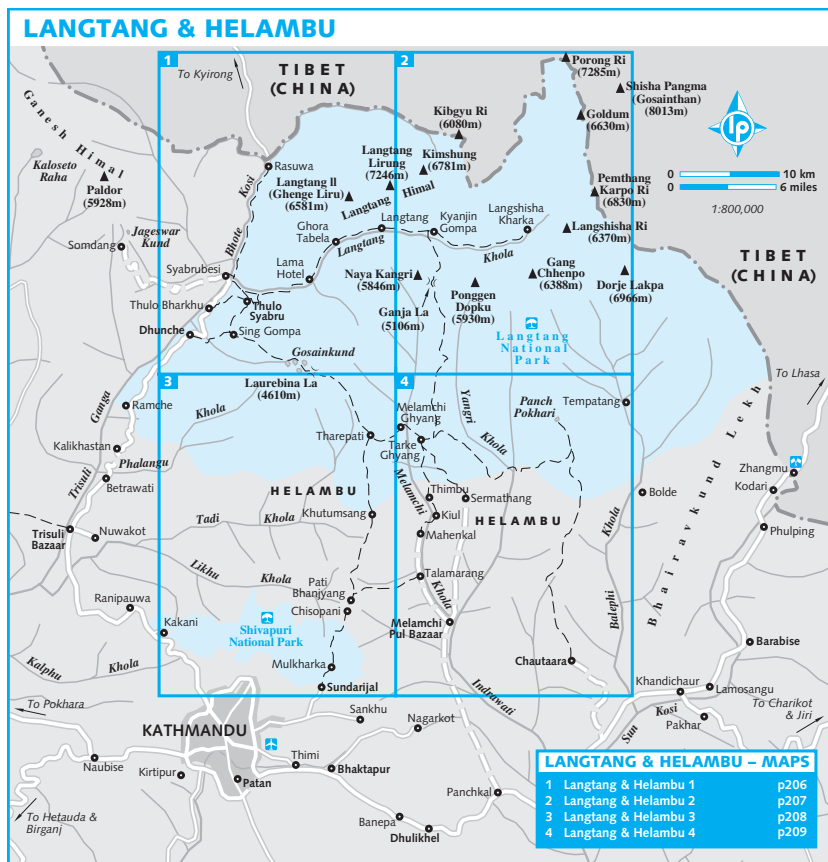
Much of this region falls into Langtang National Park and, away from the larger settlements, there is a surprising amount of old-growth forest: chir pine, rhododendron and alder. Magnificent old rhododendrons grace the trail between Tharepati and Malemchigaon on the upper Helambu trek. The larch of the Langtang region is unusual among conifers in that it is deciduous, lending the forest an unmistakable yellow hue during autumn.

In order to really experience the full breadth of wildflowers, you must endure the monsoon rains. There are, however, some species that bloom at other times of the year, such as the sky-blue gentians of the dry subalpine and alpine regions and

the lavender primulas, or primroses, of moist areas. The varieties of epiphytic orchids that adorn the wet forests also flower at various times of the year.

In Langtang watch for hawks or buzzards, medium-sized raptors with broad wings and rounded, often fanned, tails. Though there are only three species, their highly variable plumage makes identification difficult. They are highly visible during winter and likely to be seen in pairs, mostly below 3000m.

Birds you will hear more than see include usually drab-coloured cuckoos; plump, green, fruit-eating barbets; and, at nightfall, various owls, owlets and nightjars, which are similar to the North American night-hawks. The laughing thrushes are another group of birds that usually betray their



presence with characteristic calls. These diverse, animated birds are more easily seen as they often congregate in large, raucous foraging parties. Related to these species are the black-capped sibilas, gregarious bronze-and-black birds typical of the oak forests with a persistent ringing call.

Also look for red-billed and yellow-billed magpies as they follow each other through the trees with long, white-tipped tails. Two more species of the forest canopy stand out – the male minivet is bright red with black, and the female yellow on black, which is striking when they burst into flight together. The slaty-headed parakeet, the only parakeet to venture into the hills, has a long, yellow-tipped tail and is vocal in its feeding flocks.

Langurs favour the spreading canopies of the lower forests; keep an eye out for them on the trail between Thulo Syabru and Sing Gompa. Around Tharepati and Gosainkund look for small, furry pikas scurrying among the rocks and boulders. The best times to see pikas are early morning and evening; just find a likely spot among the rocks, sit down and wait for them to emerge.

## INFORMATION

### When to Trek

The season for Langtang and Helambu is generally the same as in the rest of Nepal, but snow in winter, or from a freak storm in autumn, can close the upper Langtang Valley, the Ganja La pass and the route through Gosainkund. The trek through Gosainkund is particularly treacherous when there is a lot of snow on the trail.

Springtime is rhododendron season and a trek in April unveils an impressive display of plump red, pink and white flowers. The Langtang Valley is covered in wildflowers during the summer, and is therefore a good monsoon trek, although, there are hordes of leeches in the lower part of the valley.

Because the Helambu Circuit trek remains at reasonably low elevations it tends to be very hot in the Indrawati Valley in late spring, making an early-winter or early-spring departure a good choice. You should be prepared for cold and possible snow at Tharepati during winter.

### Maps & Books

The Nepa Maps/Himalayan Maphouse 1:120,000 *Langtang Gosainkund & Helambu*

is the single most useful map and includes a 1:25,000 detail of the Tamang Heritage Trail on the reverse. The most detailed map of Helambu is Nepa Maps' 1:50,000 *Helambu Trail* map. The best foreign-made maps of Langtang and Helambu are the Nelles/Schneider 1:100,000 *Helambu-Langtang* map (1998) or the National Geographic 1:125,000 *Langtang* map. Most maps do not show the eastern end of Langtang Valley, making it difficult to identify high peaks such as Dorje Lakpa. The Nepal survey 1:50,000 and 1:25,000 *Lantan* and *Dhunchu* maps cover most of the region.

Considering the huge number of books about Everest and Annapurna, it's surprising that there are almost no books that describe Langtang. HW Tilman's *Nepal Himalaya* describes his 1949 exploration of Langtang and Helambu, including his reports of yetis and account of climbs on the Tibetan border.

*Lost in the Himalayas: James Scott's 43-Day Ordeal*, by James Scott and his sister Joanne Robertson, tells the story of Scott's 43 days lost in the Langtang area (see p223).

### Permits & Regulations

Whether you choose the Langtang, Gosainkund or Helambu trek, you will enter Langtang National Park and will have to pay a Rs 1000 entry fee. The army is vigilant about checking your permit. There are checkpoints at Dhunche, Ghora Tabela, Khutumsang (and possibly Sermathang) that won't let you pass without a park permit. The road to Dhunche passes through a portion of the park, so you must pay the park fee even if you only drive to Dhunche.

If you start or end your trek at Sundarjal, you will enter Shivapuri National Park and be subject to a Rs 250 entry fee, payable at Chisopani or Sundarjal.

Use of firewood is officially prohibited throughout Langtang National Park, even though most lodges use it, and you must carry stoves and fuel if you are camping. Officially it's forbidden to carry a video camera, with a US\$1000 fine.

### Accommodation

There are trekkers lodges throughout Langtang, Gosainkund and Helambu. The abundance of lodges has caused cut-throat competition and many hotels charge only



a nominal amount, if anything, as long as you eat in their restaurant. Facilities are not quite as developed as those on the Everest and Annapurna trek routes, but they are certainly adequate. The only places where you'll have to suffer basic lodges are Gopte and Phedi. Most lodges offer free hot showers if you stay but, for environmental reasons, avoid those where the water is heated by wood fires.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Unlike other trekking areas in Nepal there are no reliable flight options into the Langtang region. Helicopters occasionally fly to Kyanjin Gumpa, transporting mountaineering groups or on sightseeing trips. Langtang is close enough to Kathmandu that a group of four or five can share a chopper for about US\$300 per person. Don't expect to find a seat back to Kathmandu unless you have made prior arrangements.

All trailheads can be reached by bus or taxi (see the Gateways section, right, for details).

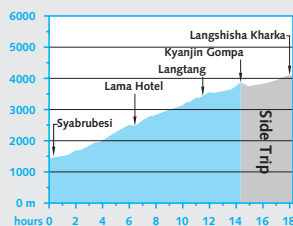
# LANGTANG VALLEY

Langtang is a narrow valley sandwiched between the main Himalayan range to the north, bordering Tibet, and a slightly lower range of snowy peaks to the south. A visit to the Langtang Valley offers an opportunity to explore villages, bag small peaks and visit glaciers at a comfortably low elevation. Though it's close to Kathmandu, the region sees far fewer trekkers (about 4500 annually) than Everest and Annapurna.

Mighty Langtang Lirung (7246m) dominates the valley to the north; Gang Chhenpo (6388m) and the trekking peak of Naya Kangri (5846m) lie to the south; and Dorje Lakpa (6966m) protects the east end of the valley. The area was designated Nepal's first Himalayan national park in 1971, although the park was not officially established until 1976.

This high and isolated region is inhabited by Tamangs whose religious practices, language and dress are much more similar to those of Tibet than to the traditions of their cousins in the Middle Hills. According to legend a lama following a runaway yak

## Langtang Valley



discovered the valley. Hence the name – *lang* is Tibetan for 'yak' and *teng* (more correctly *dhang*) means 'to follow'. Yaks still live in the upper valley, but they now share it with trekkers. There are some particularly fine excursions from Kyanjin Gumpa so allow a few extra days for exploration of the extensive glacier system.

## PLANNING

### Route Options

This section suggests two approaches to Kyanjin Gumpa, in the heart of the Langtang Valley. From Langtang there are several alternatives for returning to Kathmandu. It is possible to make the trek back to Syabrubesi or Dhunche in only two days from Langtang village because most of it is downhill. If it has not snowed recently and you have basic mountaineering skills, camping equipment and good weather, you can cross over Ganja La into Helambu, but this is a challenging and potentially dangerous route. The third, and best, alternative is to trek back to Thulo Syabru from Langtang, then cross into Helambu via Gosainkund.

## Emergency Facilities

There are national park radios at Ghora Tabela, Langtang and Magin Goth, and telephones at Dhunche, Sing Gumpa, Thulo Syabru and Tarke Gyang. The Yeti Guest House and Yala Peak Guest House at Kyanjin Gumpa have a satellite phone that can be used to summon a chopper in an emergency. There is a hospital at Dhunche and a health post at Syabrubesi.

## GATEWAYS

Dhunche is your first destination if you are taking the direct route to Gosainkund



via Sing Gompa, otherwise continue on to Syabrubesi if you are headed straight for the Langtang Valley. It's also possible to start either the Langtang or Gosainkund trek at Thulo Bharkhu, halfway between Dhunche and Syabrubesi.

## Dhunche

☎ 010 / elevation 1950m

If you are going to Langtang you will pass through Dhunche (pronounced 'doon-chay'), 117km from Kathmandu. The direct (steep) trail to Sing Gompa and Gosainkund starts from here (see p219).

The administrative headquarters of the region, Dhunche is a fairly pleasant place. Lodges and shops line the main road, which hides the original settlement on the hill below. The Langtang National Park office and checkpoint is less than 1km before the town.

Just below Dhunche is the Trisuli Ganga, which flows from Gosainkund (see p221). According to legend, this river was formed when Shiva released the waters of the holy lakes with his *trisul* (trident). North of the confluence with the Trisuli the river is known as Bhote Kosi ('river from Tibet'), the name given to most of the rivers that cross the Himalaya into Nepal. These 'Bhote Kosi' generally assume the name of the smaller Nepali tributary, which is what happens here.

If by some miracle your bus arrived early and you have time to kill, check out the small **Tamang Museum** (admission Rs 100), below the road and accessed by steps beside the Annapurna Hotel.

## INFORMATION

**Internet access** (Rs per hr 60; ☎ 7am-9pm) Across from the Hotel Langtang View.

**Langtang National Park** (☎ 540210) Checkpost and information centre, 1km before Dhunche, where you'll pay the Rs 1000 park entry fee.

## SLEEPING & EATING

The **Hotel Langtang View** (☎ 540141, Kathmandu 01-4355481; s/d with shared bathroom Rs100/200, with private bathroom Rs 300/400) is the most popular place to stay, with a good restaurant and rooftop seating that boasts views into Tibet. It's run by a former teacher and is the place to arrange porters (Rs 450 per day) and 4WD hire back to Kathmandu.

**Himalaya Legend** (☎ 540112; r with shared/private bathroom Rs 150/200) is another good choice, with a cosy dining hall on the top floor and a small bakery. It's connected to the Hotel Green Hill in Sing Gompa (see p218).

Other acceptable places include the Tibet Mountain View and Dhunche Guest House, with rooms for Rs 150 to Rs 250.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses to Dhunche (Rs 180, nine hours) leave from the Machha Pokhari (Fish Pond) junction, just north of the Kathmandu Ring Rd, and also from the nearby Gongabu bus station. Buses leave at 6.30am, 7.30am and 8.30am. It's a long, draining, bone-rattling drive that has prompted some travellers to claim they decided to trek the eight days back to Kathmandu (via Gosainkund) just to avoid the return bus trip! It's not that bad but until you actually take the journey it's hard to imagine how any bus could take nine hours to cover 117km.

The bus passes through Ranipauwa (Km27) and then Trisuli Bazaar (548m; Km72; three hours), the site of a dam and hydroelectric project. The nearby fort at Nuwakot was the site of a peace treaty in 1792 between Nepal's Gurkha rulers and the invading Chinese army. In autumn you can see huge piles of long, freshly washed radishes (*mula* in Nepali) alongside the road around Ranipauwa. The steep switch-back road to Dhunche climbs 1400m from Trisuli Bazaar and this section is sometimes blocked during the monsoon.

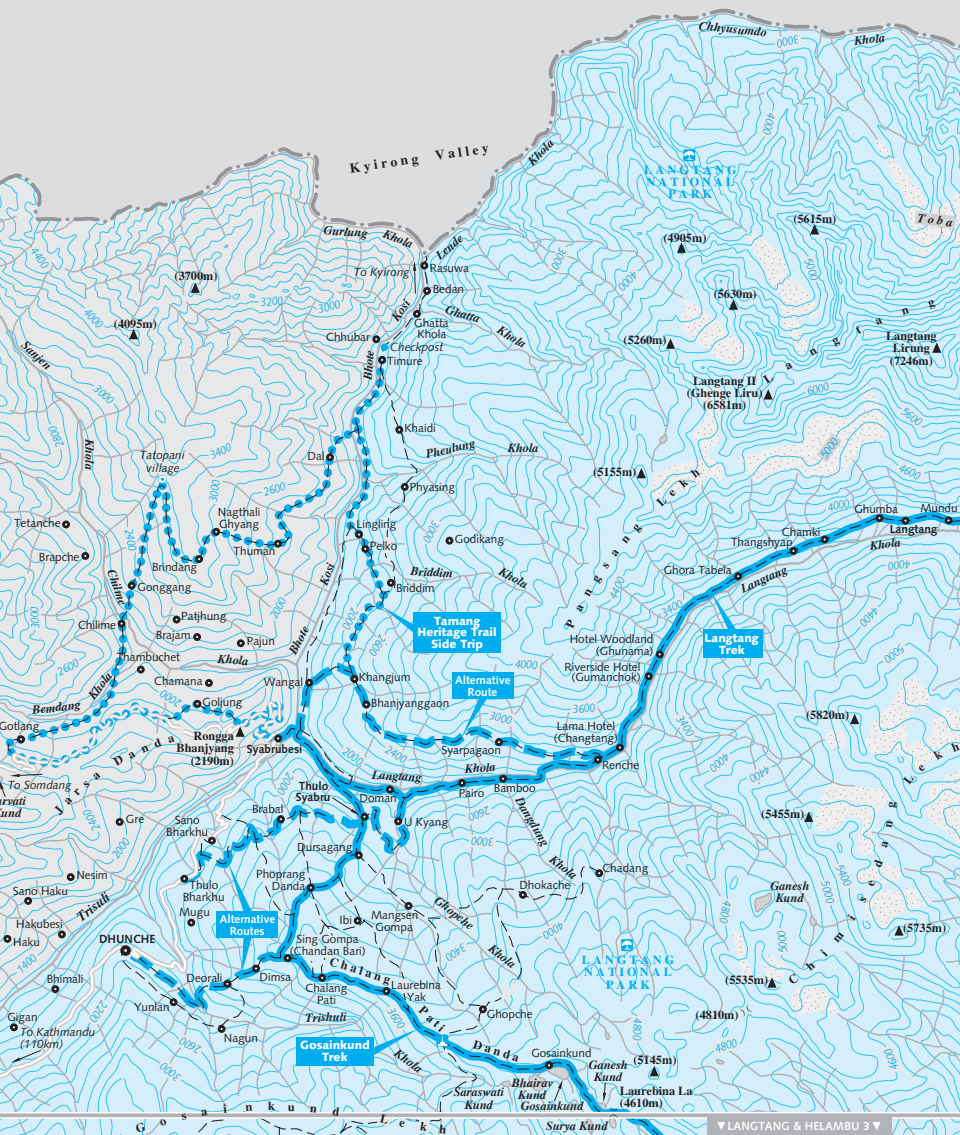
Just before you arrive in Dhunche you'll have to get off the bus at the Langtang National Park office, register, show or buy your park ticket (Rs 1000) and present your Trekking Information Management System (TIMS) card (see p369).

The return bus from Dhunche to Kathmandu leaves at 7.15am. Make reservations the day before at the kiosk between the Langtang View and Himalaya Legend hotels. Buses from Syabrubesi and Chilime pass through around 8am and 9am en route to Kathmandu but they are almost always full.

If you can't face the bus trip back to Kathmandu, the Hotel Langtang View can arrange a 4WD to/from Kathmandu for Rs 8000 each way for four passengers. Call the hotel manager at ☎ 01-4355481 to arrange a vehicle from Kathmandu.



## LANGTANG &amp; HELAMBU 1

TIBET  
(CHINA)

0 8 km  
0 4 miles

Scale 1:200,000

# LANGTANG & HELAMBU 2



## LANGTANG &amp; HELAMBU 3



0 4 miles 8 km Scale 1:200,000

# LANGTANG & HELAMBU 4



## Syabrubesi

☎ 010 / elevation 1470m

Syabrubesi, the trailhead for treks into the narrow Langtang Valley, is a string of well-stocked roadside shops and lodges and is a pleasant-enough place to start or end a trek. Below the road on the east side is a camp site, more shops and some government and army buildings. The original settlement of Syabrubesi is on the east side of the river.

### SLEEPING & EATING

A good choice of accommodation lines the main drag.

**Buddha Guest House** (☎ 670059; r Rs 100) is a well-run place with pleasant garden seating, spacious rooms, clean common bathrooms and good food.

**Hotel Peaceful** (☎ 670007; r Rs 200) is a carbon copy but with harder beds. The owner and his brother can act as guides for the Tamang Heritage trail (see below).

**Hotel Sky** (☎ 670141; hotelsky@yahoo.com; r with shared/private bathroom Rs 200/300) is a bit of a concrete eyesore but the food is good and the attached rooms have a balcony.

**Hotel Lhasa** (☎ 670008; r with shared/private bathroom Rs 200/300) is popular, though the common rooms are the best bet.

Smaller places include the friendly **Potala Guest House** (r Rs 100).

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

There is at least one direct daily bus from Kathmandu to Syabrubesi, about 15km (a one-hour drive) past Dhunche. The road descends from Dhunche to Thulo Bharkhu, where a trail offers an alternative route to Langtang or Gosainkund (see opposite). The road then drops in a series of steep loops to a bridge across the Bhote Kosi and the generating station for the Chilime power plant. A short distance beyond is Syabrubesi.

Bus depart Syabrubesi for Kathmandu (Rs 250 to Rs 290) at 7.30am sharp. Seats

## TAMANG HERITAGE TRAIL

As part of its Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Programme (TRPAP), the Nepal Tourism Board established the Tamang Heritage Trail, a village tourism project in the Tibetan-influenced Rasuwa district bordering Langtang (see Maps pp206–7). The aim of the initiative is to bring tourism money to communities off the main tourist routes. Profits from homestay accommodation, food sales, handicrafts and Tamang cultural performances are split between the individuals concerned and village social funds. It's a sometimes uneasy mix of community-based tourism and free-market economics but the route provides an interesting add-on to the more commercialised Langtang area. Trekkers who have hiked these routes say it's like trekking in Langtang 20 years ago.

A five- or six-day loop of the region from Syabrubesi is the best option. Day one takes you up steep switchbacks, gaining 720m to the Rongga Bhanjyang (alternatively hop on the late-afternoon bus to Chilime for this section). Head up the hill for a detour to Goljung or continue along the dirt road to Gotlang, the largest Tamang village in the area, from where you can make the short detour to Parvati Kund lake. Day two can take you to the community-run hot spring pools at Tatopani, via Chilime and Gonggang (an ascent of 840m). Day three climbs 560m to the ridge of Nagthali Ghyang for fine mountain views and descends 820m to Thuman. On day four follow the ridge, then descend another 640m to cross the Bhote Kosi and hike north to Timure. Alternatively head south to Briddim (a 400m ascent) via Lingling. Briddim (2229m) has 24 simple homestays (there are only 43 houses in the village!). From here it's all downhill (770m descent) to Syabrubesi via Wangal, or you can link up with the Langtang trek by taking the high northern alternative route via Syarpagaon (see p215).

It's also possible to trek along the old Tibetan trade route via Timure to Rasuwagadhi (Rasuwa) Fort on the border with Tibet's Kyirong Valley (once an important trading post on the salt route), though for this you need a travel agency to help arrange a restricted-area permit (US\$10).

Accommodation is available in a community lodge in Gotlang, homestays in Briddim, or in private houses or lodges in Goljung, Tatopani, Timure and Thuman. Costs are around Rs 150 per person per night, plus Rs 100 per meal. In general, the village homestays offer a more intimate experience than the large-scale lodges of Langtang. You should be able to find a licensed guide in Syabrubesi for around Rs 1000 per day, which includes food and accommodation.



sell out quickly so book a seat the day before at the roadside ticket office.

## Thulo Bharkhu

elevation 2140m

Thulo Bharkhu offers an offbeat start to the Gosainkund or Langtang treks. Good views of the Ganesh Himal range, a higher elevation start and an hour less on the bus are three advantages to starting here, though the lodges are not as comfortable as Dhunche's and you face a more immediate ascent on foot.

It's a short drive from Dhunche to Thulo Bharkhu or you can hike along the road to reach it in about 1½ hours. Lodges are limited to the simple **Hotel Sherpa** (r Rs 100) or **Hotel Maya** (r Rs 120). See p220 for details of the walk to Thulo Syabru.

## LANGTANG VALLEY

**Duration** 7-8 days

**Max Elevation** 3870m

**Difficulty** medium

**Season** September to May

**Start** Syabrubesi, opposite (or Thulo Bharkhu, above)

**Finish** Syabrubesi (or Dhunche, p205)

**Summary** Close to Kathmandu, with inexpensive transport, this trek climbs through forests to a picture-postcard alpine valley ringed by 7000m peaks, just south of the Tibetan border.

## THE TREK (SEE MAPS PP206-7)

### Day 1: Syabrubesi to Lama Hotel

6-7 hours, 1070m ascent

The trail branches off the main road in Syabrubesi opposite the Hotel Village View. Pass the camp site below the town and hike northward past a police post (you'll need to register) to a suspension bridge over the Bhote Kosi. On the east side of the bridge a sign points left to Wangal and 'Khanjim' (Khangjum). This is the high route to Lama Hotel via Syarpagaon (often incorrectly named Sherpagaon), as well as the trail to Briddim (see opposite). The trail north, up the main valley, to Briddim, Timure and the border town of Rasuwa was once a major trade route with Tibet, and may soon be once again as the road is set to continue to the border to link up with the Kyirong

## LANGTANG VALLEY – TIMES

The following are trekking times only; stops are not included.

Day	Section	Hours
1	Syabrubesi to Doman	1:30
	Doman to Pairo	0:35
	Pairo to Bamboo	1:00
	Bamboo to Lower Renche	1:15
	Lower Renche to Upper Renche	0:15
	Upper Renche to Lama Hotel	0:20
2	Lama Hotel to Riverside Hotel	1:00
	Riverside Hotel to Hotel	
	Woodland (Ghunama)	0:10
	Hotel Woodland (Ghunama) to	
	Ghora Tabela	0:45
	Ghora Tabela to Thangshyap	0:45
3	Thangshyap to Chamki	0:25
	Chamki to Langtang	1:00
	Langtang to Mundu	0:30
	Mundu to Sindum	0:20
	Sindum to Kyanjin Gompa	1:40
	Side Trip: Kyanjin Gompa to Jatang	1:30
	Jatang to Nubathang	0:50
	Nubathang to Langshisha	
	Kharka	1:10

Valley in Tibet. It shouldn't be too many years before organised groups can travel to Tibet by this route.

Turn right at the eastern end of the bridge and then take a left, climbing to enter the village of old Syabrubesi under a *kani* (entrance gate). There are a couple of lodges here but they are normally closed. The village gompa (monastery) is in a small stone building at the far (east) end of the village. The primary image is Guru Rinpoche, flanked by his two consorts.

After a visit to the gompa, follow the stone-paved main street out of town to a bridge over the Langtang Khola (20 minutes). Cross this bridge and follow the trail on the south side of the river for 15 minutes to a junction where a signposted trail to Thulo Syabru (and Gosainkund) branches right; for Langtang continue straight. The south bank trail makes a couple of short climbs and descents through forests. There is a slightly more direct (fewer ups and downs) but less-used route from old Syabrubesi along the north bank that crosses back to the south side on a log bridge after



about an hour of walking but you need to check with the locals that the log bridge is still there.

Beyond the log bridge (one hour) the trek becomes a pleasant walk through trees where langur monkeys frolic, crossing a side stream and passing a small landslide before reaching three simple *bhattis* (teashops) beside the stream, suspension bridge and waterfall of **Doman** (1672m). The trail then makes a steep climb over a rocky ridge to the side of the waterfall for 15 minutes to an easily missed **junction** (1730m; N 28° 09.038', E 085° 22.421'), where the route from Thulo Syabru joins from above. For the rest of this day and the following morning there are few settlements, but the forest abounds with birds. There is also a variety of wildlife in these forests: yellow-throated martens, wild boars, langur monkeys, red pandas and Himalayan black bears. Climb over a rocky ridge and descend to the river bridges, waterfalls and two lodges at **Païro** (1800m), which means 'Landslide'. It's marked on some maps as Hot Springs Hotel and there is indeed a small hot spring across the river.

It's then a long climb in forests to another trail junction, beyond which the trail climbs gently to **Bamboo** (1930m), a cluster of three lodges (none made of bamboo) in a relatively wide section of valley. This region specialises in the sale of colourful woollen socks and belts. On the opposite side of the river are near-vertical cliffs. The Sherpa, Tibet and Bamboo lodges all offer similar rooms for between Rs 50 and Rs 200 but there's no electricity. The Tibet has some bakery items and the Bamboo Lodge has a hot shower.

Beyond Bamboo the trail crosses the Dangdung Khola, then climbs past a small landslide to a steel suspension bridge over the Langtang Khola at 2000m; there is a small *bhatti* on the northern bank.

On the north bank of the Langtang Khola the route climbs alongside a series of waterfalls formed by a jumble of house-sized boulders. The forest is sparser and drier on this side of the river, consisting mainly of scrub oaks, cactuses and nettles, as opposed to the damp forest of large pines on the shady southern bank. Climb steeply to a landslide and the secluded and simple Hotel Langtang View in lower **Renche**

(Rimche; 2400m). Fifteen minutes later in upper Renche (2470m) there is a trail junction that connects to the high route back to Syabrubesi via Syarpagaon (see p215). The pleasant and sunny Hotel Ganesh View has nine rooms and a phone. The Tibet Lodge is a few minutes further and offers views across the valley to Thulo Syabru.

You have now finished most of the day's climbing; ascend gently to Changtang, popularly known as **Lama Hotel** (2480m). There are half a dozen lodges here, including Sherpa Lodge, which offers rooms (Rs 200) with an attached bathroom that you really wish was further away. The Friendly Guest House is rebuilding after burning down in a fire. The Tibet Guest House is the original 'Lama Hotel' and has been going for 30 years, though it's still got only four basic rooms. The large Lama Guest House at the top of the settlement has the best rooms and offers solar hot showers. All rooms are Rs 50 to Rs 100. The next accommodation (fairly simple) is about an hour on at Riverside Lodge.

## Day 2: Lama Hotel to Langtang

4–5 hours, 980m ascent

The day starts with a gentle climb, but it soon becomes steeper, climbing through a wild forest of hemlocks, oaks, maples and white and pink rhododendrons high above the Langtang Khola. Tantalising glimpses of Langtang Lirung appear through the trees. At Gumanchok is the Riverside Hotel. Located on the banks of the river at 2770m, it's one of the loveliest spots of the trek. The riverside tables are a nice place to stop for tea but the rooms are disappointing.

Ten minutes on, the small Hotel Woodland has four pleasant but simple rooms in a charming clearing known as Ghunama. The trail crosses a stream then climbs steeply to a pass marked with prayer flags, crossing another stream on a miniature Bailey bridge to reach the busy lunch spot of **Ghora Tabela** (2970m). Once a Tibetan resettlement project, this is now a Nepal army and national park post and has no permanent inhabitants except for the operators of the two lodges. The Hotel Tibetan has particularly pleasant outdoor seating beside a prayer-flag pole, with good views towards Langtang Lirung. The next-door Lovely Lodge is simpler.



The trail ascends gradually as the valley opens up into a classic U-shaped glacial valley. Just beyond the lodges is an army post that will check your park receipt. Follow the trail across the helipad and yak pastures and climb briefly through rhododendrons to the three good but little-frequented lodges at **Thangshyap** (3200m). The route, now in open country, climbs the hillside diagonally above fields of buckwheat, potato and barley to the Hotel Langtang View at Chamki.

Pass the Tibetan Restaurant and Peaceful Restaurant, where you may be able to buy curd and cheese, and continue for 30 minutes to the Tibetan Family Guesthouse and Hotel Ever View Point at Ghumba village, a quiet alternative to staying in Langtang, just 15 minutes away. The gomba above the village is worth visiting if you can get a lodge owner to track down the key. The trail crosses a stream and climbs past several water-driven mills and prayer wheels to the large settlement of **Langtang** (3430m).

This village is the headquarters for Langtang National Park; the park buildings are those below the village with metal roofs. Huge twin waterfalls pour out of a cleft in the rock wall above town and there are views of 6581m Langtang II. A *chorten*, *mani* wall and elaborately carved community lodge mark the centre of Langtang, which, unlike other settlements in the valley, is an actual village.

The dozen or so lodges include the Valley View, Peace Full, Pilgreen, Buddha and Namaste lodges, the latter with a pleasant camping area. Most rooms cost from Rs 100 to Rs 200. The large **Village View Hotel & Lodge** (☎ 019-534004) is run by the same family as the Yala Peak in Kyanjin Gomba and has a cosy dining room, a public telephone and quieter rooms in the block just below the hotel.

Above the village, behind the Eco Guest House, the **cooperative bakery** (bread Rs 90; ☎ 5am-6pm) sells freshly baked bread and apple pie; try the toasted cheese and tomato bread (Rs 200). The locally made cheese (Rs 60 per 100g) makes a good lunch for day hikes around Kyanjin Ri. Profits go towards maintaining the village hydroelectric generator.

The traditional stone and wood houses of the upper village are worth exploring.

Houses here have Tibetan-style flat roofs and elaborately carved wooden windows. The villagers keep herds of yaks and cattle here and in pastures above the village.

It is tempting to go beyond Langtang, but not a good idea from the point of view of acclimatisation. You may not have noticed it because the trail has climbed gently, but you have ascended almost 1000m since Lama Hotel. Trekkers have fallen ill, and some have died, in this region because of altitude problems. Don't go beyond Langtang village if you have come from Lama Hotel, and descend immediately if you suffer a severe headache or vomiting.

### Day 3: Langtang to Kyanjin Gomba

2-3 hours, 460m ascent

The trail winds through the village and climbs a ridge topped by a large *chorten*. It then climbs gradually past an impressive *mani* wall, crossing a stream to the small village of **Mundu** (3442m), where you'll find the two-roomed Tip Top Lodge (25 minutes). There are teashops 20 minutes later at Sindum and 20 minutes further still beside a huge boulder draped in prayer flags. The trail rejoins the rushing river and climbs to a yak-wool shop and teashop beside the yak pastures of Yamphu (3640m). Cross the Laja Chu on an ugly cement bridge (1¼ hours), then climb a moraine to a viewpoint where you can finally see the monastery of Kyanjin Gomba and the dramatic icefall flowing from the peaks of Langtang Lirung and Kimshung (Kinshung). After a final ridge the trail descends to the large cluster of lodges below **Kyanjin Gomba** (3860m). It is easy to reach Kyanjin Gomba before lunch, allowing time to acclimatise and explore the surroundings, including the Nyingmapa-school monastery.

The busiest lodge in the village is the **Yala Peak Guest House** (☎ 019-534004; dawaa\_lama@yahoo.com; r Rs 200), which has been operating since 1971 and boasts a Western toilet, solar shower and cosy dining room, plus a good bakery that churns out delicious early-morning cinnamon rolls, brown bread and apple pie (Rs 100 to Rs 150). The sunny outdoor seating is a bonus. The nearby Yeti Guest House is another superb place, with super-friendly staff, a nice dining room and solar lights in the carpeted rooms.



Other good places include the Naya Khang Guesthouse, Lovely Guest House, Hotel Super View and Tibet Guest House. The Monastery Guest House is a quiet and friendly place away from the other lodges. Places to the east such as Nurlin Kyanjin Gompa Guest House and Sunrise boast the best valley views and offer camp sites. Be aware that the less popular lodges will send you down the trail to try to steer you into their hotel. A dal bhat here ranges from Rs 180 in most places to Rs 250 at the Yeti.

Most lodges sell goodies like Snickers and Pringles, for a price. You can make domestic (Rs 15 per minute) and international (Rs 150) calls from the satellite phones at the Yeti and Yala Peak guesthouses. The Yeti Guest House runs a community clinic in case you get sick (the owner's son is a doctor in Kathmandu).

Just north of Hotel Yala Peak is a cheese factory started with Swiss assistance in 1955. It operates during the summer only and produces about 7000kg of cheese annually, all of it hauled by porters to a dairy in Kathmandu. You can sometimes buy cheese and curd here between May and December. The large peak at the head of the valley is 6388m Gang Chhenpo.

## Days 4–5: Langtang Valley

There are several superb possible day hikes from Kyanjin Ri and you should really budget a couple of days to explore the wonderful valley. Clouds obscure the peaks most afternoons so aim for an early start.

You can hike up the **Lirung Valley** north of the monastery for spectacular views of Langtang Lirung, Kimshung (6781m) and Yansa Tsenji (6575m) peaks on the border with Tibet and the glaciers that tumble off them. You can sometimes spot Himalayan tahr on the slopes above. The path from the monastery passes a junction (N 28° 13.194', E 085° 34.324') after 20 minutes, where the main trail continues up the true left side of the river, the Laja or Lirung Chu. The trail eventually veers to the right and climbs a ridge for fine views. If you descend to the north across glacial streams, you can climb the moraine ahead for close-up views of Kimshung Glacier. From here you can return the same way or continue west towards the Tserpochi (Chhairpochh) Kharka pastures before swinging south downstream

along the base of the moraine wall back towards the earlier junction, making a short side climb en route up the moraine wall to a lone tree for views over the Lirung Glacier. Figure on a four-hour return trip.

There are two superb high viewpoints in the area you can climb. To the northeast of Kyanjin Gompa is the **Kyanjin Ri viewpoint** (4600m; N 28° 13.416', E 085° 34.549') – a half-day return climb. The small peak with prayer flags that you see above Kyanjin Gompa is not Kyanjin Ri itself, but a much lower viewpoint (gulp). Head northeast from the lodges and traverse the slopes below the viewpoint to reach a *chorten* and prayer flag after 15 minutes. The direct path branches left to follow the ridge line up to the viewpoint but most people take the less steep gully path to the right. You can always take one route up and the other down. The gully path continues from the *chorten*, then branches left to follow the gully for the next hour. Near the top of the valley is an eroded sandy area; the path keeps to the right then crosses the sand to a pass marked by a collection of prayer flags. The main viewpoint is further east along the ridge and marked by cairns. The views are just superb. Take care on the descent because the ball-bearing-like stones make it easy to lose your footing. Clouds often roll in during the afternoon, making it easy to lose your way on the descent.

A longer full-day excursion is to the conical-shaped 4984m **Tsergo Ri** (also spelt Tserko), a tough five-hour climb from Kyanjin Gompa. Take the trail east towards Langshisha Kharka, cross the side stream, then branch left by a cairn up the side valley to a steep switchbacking ascent up the hill. The path passes stone goths at Yala Kharka before climbing steeply up scree around the back of the mountain to the prayer flags atop the viewpoint. Expect snow at the summit as late as April.

For a less strenuous hike try the pleasant two-hour return walk to the **Tsona lakes** (Tsona means 'Black Lake' in Tibetan but can also mean *tso nga*, or 'five lakes'). From the lodges at Kyanjin Gompa head back down valley to the concrete bridge over the Laja Chu (see p213). Instead of crossing the bridge, take the path to the left for 15 minutes to cross the bridge over the main Langtang Khola. A faint trail bears



right, past pastures and goths to curve east around the boundary of the boggy pastures. The path peters out just before the first pond (3800m; N 28° 12.371', E 085° 33.727'), so you'll have to wander off trail to discover the five ponds, before looping back along the river to rejoin the bridge. The tarns make a fine place for a picnic lunch. From the bridge you can follow the more direct path back up the hillside to the Naya Khang Guest House.

There are also two possible climbing projects: 5500m Yala Peak (not to be confused with Yala Kharka), and 5749m Tsergo Peak (which is different from Tsergo Ri). Both are two-day expeditions that involve glacier climbing and a high camp on a saddle above the trail near Nubathang, so you need to plan these ascents well before setting out on this trek. Yala Peak is on the government's list of trekking peaks (see p345).

### SIDE TRIP: LANGSHISHA KHARKA

6½–7½ hours, ascent 500m, descent 500m

It's worth taking an extra day or two to continue further up the Langtang Valley to Langshisha Kharka for spectacular mountain views. There are no facilities beyond Kyanjin Gomba, but you can make a long day trip and return to Kyanjin Gomba for the night. If you have a tent and food, you could make a sublime overnight camp at Langshisha Kharka or another of the summer pastures high in the valley. The Yala Peak Guest House sometimes rents out tents (Rs 300 per day), though you'd still need a good sleeping bag, mat and food.

The trail to Langshisha descends from Kyanjin Gomba across a side stream, and passes above the faint remains of the Langtang airstrip to follow the river upstream as the valley narrows. Pass under an arch formed by two boulders and climb to some herders' huts at **Jatang** (3930m; 90 minutes), where massive Langshisha Ri (6427m) comes into full view. Thirty minutes later the snowy peaks of Tenbathang and the Dorje Himal range reveal themselves to the south. Traverse through meadows to **Nubathang** (3990m, 2¼ hours), where a climbers trail leads up to Yala Peak. The trail leads through shrubs, crosses a stream on a rickety seasonal bridge and follows cairns over a glacial outwash, skirting the Shalbachum moraine to a lovely **viewpoint**

at 4100m (three hours), which overlooks Langshisha Kharka and the peaks of Dorje Lakpa (6966m) and Penthang Karpo Ri (6830m). A 15-minute descent leads to a yak pasture, prayer flags and a single goth at **Langshisha Kharka** (4100m; N 28° 12.790', E 085° 40.186'). The large reddish-coloured boulder nearby is said to be the site where the lama found his lost yak, leading to the valley being named 'Langtang' (see the Langtang Valley introduction, p204). The holy man skinned the yak and placed it on the boulder to dry, whereupon it merged with the rock, creating its unusual reddish tints.

To the southeast is Urkeinmang (6151m) and Tilman's Col, a high mountaineering route to Jugal Himal that crosses a steep and difficult icefall on the south side. If you have a tent and stove you could explore the upper valley above Morimoto Base Camp. According to early trekker HW Tilman, the upper Langshisha area was prime yeti territory in the mid 1940s, with herdsmen claiming multiple sightings of both small yetis (known as *chumi*) and a larger species known as *yilmu*. From here, retrace your footsteps to Kyanjin Gomba.

### Return to Kathmandu

There are half a dozen ways to vary your return route. You can return to Syabrubesi by the same route or vary it by taking the high Syarpagaon trail (see below). You could return to Thulo Bharkhu via Thulo Syabru and Brabal (see p220) or return to Dhunche via Sing Gomba (p219). You can also continue to Gosainkund via Sing Gomba. If you have camping gear and conditions allow it you can even climb over the Ganja La.

### ALTERNATIVE ROUTE: SYARPAGAON TRAIL

5 hours, ascent 180m, descent 1180m

The high route via Syarpagaon (Sherpagaon) branches off the main trail at the Hotel Ganesh View in upper Renche (a good overnight spot, six hours below Kyanjin Gomba). Climb for 45 minutes to prayer flags and views of Syarpagaon. The dramatic trail climbs high above the valley floor and though it's not dangerous, there are several places where the trail is built up on a cliff face with a sheer drop below, so anyone afraid of heights should opt for the



main lower trail. **Syarpagaon** (2600m) has three peaceful and cosy lodges, as does the village of **Khangjum**, just over two hours away. Ninety minutes from Syarpagaon follow the lower trail as it descends on stone steps towards the blue roof of a local lama's house just above **Khangjum** (2290m). The peaceful new Hotel Friendship above the village claims to be 'one of the best hotels in Khangjum', which is no great boast considering there are only two hotels in town. Further down is the Hotel Village View. From Khangjum it's a steep 775m descent to Wangal (1690m) and then Syabrubesi (two hours from Khangjum), or detour an hour north along the hillside to Briddim (see p210).

To go to Gosainkund or return directly to Dhunche, trek back to the junction just before Doman (see p212) and climb 400m up to Thulo Syabru. After a night in Thulo Syabru (see p218), it's an easy day to Dhunche via Brabal, or you can climb on to Sing Gompa and continue to Gosainkund.

## GANJA LA

**Duration** 5 days

**Max Elevation** 5106m

**Difficulty** hard

**Season** October to November, March to May

**Start** Kyanjin Gompa (right)

**Finish** Tarke Gyang (opposite)

**Summary** Cross from Langtang into Helambu over a steep and exposed high pass that is often closed by snow. You'll need camping gear and a guide as it's easy to get lost.

You'll need to be well equipped to cross from Kyanjin Gompa in Langtang to Tarke Gyang in Helambu, over the 5106m Ganja La. This is not an easy crossing (see the Warning, right) and you need a tent and stove for both you and your guide/porters, but it does allow you to make a neat 14-day loop that combines the Langtang Valley and Gosainkund lakes, without the need for backtracking.

The Yala Peak and Yeti guesthouses in Kyanjin Gompa can arrange pricey guides and porters for the crossing. A guide and porter for five days (three days to cross the pass, two for them to return) costs a whopping

## WARNING

A guide who knows the trail, plus a tent, food and fuel are essential for crossing the Ganja La. The pass is difficult and dangerous when it's covered by snow, so for a safe crossing, local enquiries about its condition, good equipment and some mountaineering experience are necessary. You can assume the pass will be open from May to early November, although unusual weather can alter its condition at any time. The parents of a trekker who died on this route have asked we emphasise that under no circumstances should you attempt to cross the pass alone.

Rs 25,000. You're best off bringing reliable staff from Kathmandu.

## THE TREK (SEE MAPS PP206–9) Day 1: Kyanjin Gompa

An extra day in the Langtang Valley for acclimatisation is essential before beginning the ascent to Ganja La. Visit Langshisha Kharka and better still camp there overnight.

## Day 2: Kyanjin Gompa to Ngegang

This is a short day from Kyanjin Gompa, but Ngegang is the last good place to camp before beginning the final climb to the pass, and you should minimise the elevation gain to aid acclimatisation. Crossing the Langtang Khola below Kyanjin Gompa, the trail makes a steep climb along the ridge on the south side of the valley through a forest of rhododendron and juniper. Finally becoming more gentle, the trail reaches the yak pasture of **Ngegang** at about 4000m. There are goths here and on the other side of the pass, but they have no roofs during the winter, so a tent is essential. During the monsoon, herders carry bamboo mats to provide roofs for the huts, and live the entire summer in high meadows with herds of yaks and goats. Ngegang is also sometimes referred to as 'Base Camp' in reference to the nearby Naya Kang trekking peak.

## Day 3: Ngegang to Keldang

The trail continues south, following streams and moraines and climbing steeply towards the pass. As the trail climbs higher, and



comes under the shadow of the 5800m peaks to the south, you will find more and more snow. Turning southwest, the trail makes the final steep ascent to the pass at 5106m. The last 100m of the climb is a tricky balancing act on a snow slope above some steep rocks.

**Ganja La** is flanked by pinnacles that mountaineers call gendarmes and is topped by prayer flags and a large cairn of rocks. The views to the north from the pass, of Langtang Lirung and the peaks in Tibet, including Shisha Pangma at 8013m, are outstanding. On a clear day there are also views of ranges to the south. West of the pass is 5846m Naya Kangri, one of the trekking peaks you can climb with a permit from the Nepal Mountaineering Association (see p345). A base camp in this region makes a good starting point for this reasonably easy climb.

The descent from the pass is steep and dangerous as it follows a loose scree slope for about 200m before emerging onto a snow slope. Somehow, the descent from Ganja La, like most descents, seems more treacherous than the ascent, no matter which direction one crosses the pass. However, Ganja La is one of the steeper and more difficult of the major passes in Nepal. After the initial steep drop, the trail descends gradually in a huge basin surrounded by glaciated peaks.

The route descends through the basin on an indistinct trail, marked occasionally by rock cairns, to the headwaters of the Yangri Khola at 4400m. You need a knowledgeable guide here; people have become lost – and died – in this area. Don't follow the river downstream; climb west towards the ridge, following the route marked on most maps. If you are travelling in the reverse direction, from Helambu to Langtang, it will require a full day to reach this point from Keldang, and you should schedule two days from Keldang to the pass.

The trail enters the steep Yangri Khola Valley and drops quickly down a rough scree slope to the stream. Following the stream for some distance through grassy meadows, the trail reaches a few roofless goths at **Keldang**, at about 4270m.

#### Day 4: Keldang to Dukpu

This is a long and tiring day as the trail descends along a ridge, making many ups

and downs. In winter there is no water from Keldang to the bottom of the ridge, near Phedi, so you should plan food accordingly for this stretch of the trail. In October and November there is an ample groundwater supply in several small springs.

The route heads down the valley, but stays high above the river, finally meeting the ridge itself, then follows the ridge line to the small summer settlement of **Dukpu** (4080m).

#### Day 5: Dukpu to Tarke Gyang

From Dukpu, the trail descends further along the ridge, then makes a 180m climb to a pass at 4020m. The pass offers a commanding view of the Himalaya, from Dorje Lakpa east almost to Everest, and a panorama of the first part of the Everest trek, as far as the peak of Numbur in the Khumbu. From the pass, the trail descends through pine and rhododendron forests past tiny herders' settlements to a ridge high above Tarke Gyang. It then drops steeply to **Gekye Gumpa** (3020m), a small monastic community and the first permanent settlement since Kyanjin Gumpa. The trail continues its steep plunge to the large Sherpa village of **Tarke Ghyang** (2590m), where you join the Helambu Circuit. From here, you can travel in either direction, following Days 6 and 7 (p229) or Days 1 to 5 (p228) in reverse.

## GOSAINKUND

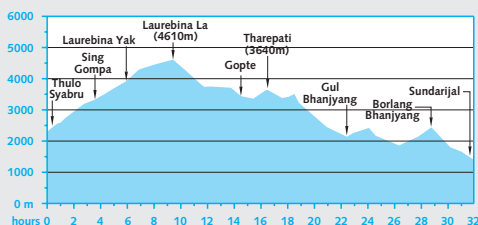
You can vary the trek to Langtang by returning to Kathmandu via the holy lakes of Gosainkund, which also makes a worthwhile seven- or eight-day trek in its own right. You could even make a short return trek from Dhunche direct to Gosainkund, although the trail is quite steep. From Tharepati (Day 5) you can continue through Helambu to Kathmandu along one of three routes.

The best way to trek to Gosainkund is to visit Langtang first, swing south to Thulo Syabru and begin the hike to Gosainkund. This has the advantage of allowing you to acclimatise before you reach the higher elevations of Gosainkund.

Up to 20,000 Hindu pilgrims come to bathe in the Gosainkund lakes during the August full-moon festival of Janai Purnima. The lake is also sacred to Buddhists, who have lined the shore with hundreds of cairns.



## Gosainkund



## ACCESS TOWNS

For information about Dhunche see p205. The Gosainkund trek ends at Sundarjal; see p224.

## GOSAINKUND

**Duration** 8 days

**Max Elevation** 4610m

**Difficulty** medium–hard

**Season** October to November, March to April

**Start** Thulo Syabru (below), Syabrubesi (p210) or Dhunche (p205)

**Finish** Sundarjal (p224)

**Summary** Visit an alpine lake that is a major pilgrimage site. Cross a high pass and trek for several days through remote country with rustic accommodation. The trail is snowbound in winter.

## PLANNING

### Accommodation

There are lodges all along the route, but they often close during winter (early December to early March). Lodge facilities are good in Sing Gompa and Tharepati, but rooms in Phedi and Gopte are basic.

There is a strict ban on the use of firewood in Gosainkund; if you are camping, be sure to bring kerosene for fuel.

## THE TREK (SEE MAPS PP206–9)

### Day 1: Thulo Syabru to Sing Gompa

3–4 hours, 1040m ascent

For details of getting to Thulo Syabru see the boxed text ‘Getting to Thulo Syabru’, p220.

**Thulo Syabru** (2260m) is a pleasant village of about 70 houses, many with elaborately carved wooden windows. There’s a ridicu-

lous number of lodges here (19) considering the small numbers of trekkers that pass through. The best lodges and restaurants are at the upper end of the village where the trail from Thulo Bharkhu enters and these include the Hotel Yak, Yeti Hotel, Langtang View, Peace Lodge and Blue Star. Most hotels face the Langtang range but also have back rooms that look out onto the Ganesh Himal. There are even a couple of internet cafes (Rs 150 per hour). Lodge construction continues at the top of town near the gompa (normally locked).

Local maps show at least three routes from Thulo Syabru to Gosainkund. Two of these bypass Sing Gompa and head directly to the teashops at Chalang Pati. The route described here is the more circuitous but easier-to-follow trail via Sing Gompa. The direct route between Chalang Pati and Thulo Syabru is only a good choice if you are coming down from Gosainkund because the trail is easy to see from above. Headed uphill it’s not an obvious route and without a guide you’ll probably follow a lot of useless side trails.

Climb past the gompa, to the left of the army post, and switchback up the steep hill above the village, past a few houses, *bhattis* and potato fields. Take the right branch after 25 minutes and then another right 20 minutes later, after passing a line of *chortens*. Eventually you will find yourself at the peaceful Mountain View Hotel at Dursagang (2735m), which isn’t a bad place to break the day if you’ve come from Syabrubesi. The trail continues steeply through forests of hemlock and oak, past an ancient-looking *chorten* and then less steeply through rhododendron forest and pastures to the top of the ridge at Pho-



prang Danda (3190m). Watch the langur monkeys play in the forests below from the windy Hotel Sunset View, which does in fact deliver with fine sunset views over the Ganesh Himal.

This is also a trail junction; the right-hand trail leads downhill behind the lodges to Brabal and Dhunche, and the far left trail is a short cut to Chalang Pati. The larger Sing Gompa trail cuts across the ridge top, staying fairly level through silent moss-covered forests as it crosses the head of a valley. Take the uphill trail at each junction and cross another ridge in a forest of large spruces. There is a view of Dhunche far below in the valley. The delightful trail continues across the head of a second valley, then reaches a final ridge at 3260m. Walk past a walled government agriculture office and branch left to the collection of lodges at Chandan Bari, also known as **Sing Gompa** (3330m).

The gompa, which has a Newari-style door frame and a statue of Chenresig, is worth a visit if open, as is the nearby **cheese factory** (cheese per kg Rs 375; ☎ 6.30am-4pm). The hillside near Chandan Bari is bare and

## WARNINGS

- You can also travel in the opposite direction, starting from Sundarjal or Helambu and trekking to Gosainkund over Laurebina La. This is a potentially dangerous route because the ascent of 1000m from Gopte to Gosainkund is difficult and exceeds the guidelines for safe acclimatisation, so you must break the climb at the very basic lodges in Phedi.
- Many maps show a trail from Laurebina Yak to Ghora Tabela, but it does not exist. Several trekkers have become lost, and one has died, trying to follow this trail after it deteriorates into landslides near the river. Take the longer route from Laurebina Yak to Thulo Syabru and then join the main Langtang trail.

scorched through a combination of logging, fire, tree disease and wind storms.

The Hotel Sherpa at the entrance to town is a good place with a cosy dining room and showers, as is the excellent Hotel Green Hill, with a bakery, Western toilets and cosy fireside seating. The nearby Red Panda has the best dining room and rooms with good mattresses in a separate block. A sign says 'please decide the room charge by yourself and put it in the box as a tip'.

## GOSAINKUND – TIMES

The following are trekking times only; stops are not included.

Day	Section	Hours
1	Thulo Syabru to Dursagang	1:00
	Dursagang to Phoprang Danda	1:10
	Phoprang Danda to Sing Gompa	0:50
2	Sing Gompa to Chalang Pati	1:10
	Chalang Pati to Laurebina Yak	1:00
3	Laurebina Yak to Gosainkund	1:45
4	Gosainkund to Laurebina La	1:15
	Laurebina La to Bera Goth (High Camp)	1:45
	Bera Goth (High Camp) to Phedi	1:00
	Phedi to Gopte	2:30
5	Gopte to Tharepati	1:30
6-7	Tharepati to Magin Goth	1:30
	Magin Goth to Khutumsang	2:30
	Khutumsang to Golphu Bhanjyang	1:45
	Golphu Bhanjyang to Thotong	0:30
	Thotong to Pati Bhanjyang	3:00
	Pati Bhanjyang to Chisopani	1:30
8	Chisopani to Borlang Bhanjyang	1:00
	Borlang Bhanjyang to Sundarjal	3:00

## ALTERNATIVE ROUTE: DHUNCHE TO SING GOMPA

6–8 hours, 1380m ascent

This is a steep, hard trek that climbs more than 1300m. From the bus stop at **Dhunche** (1950m), take a short cut down a ravine next to the Hotel Annapurna through the main part of the village. The short cut saves a long walk on a big switchback and rejoins the road at the bottom of the village. Follow the road downhill to a sign marking a level trail that follows the south bank of the Trisuli Ganga eastward through fields and pastures to a few houses. Cross the river on a wooden bridge just before the valley narrows and steepens. The trail follows the north side of the river for a short while, then begins the steep climb towards the ridge. After the initial climb, the trail levels a bit, passes through the tiny village of **Deorali** (2660m) and then continues up to the ridge. Climb through a forest of firs



## GETTING TO THULO SYABRU

You can get to Thulo Syabru from Thulo Bharkhu on the main road (easiest option), from Syabrubesi (short but steep) or from the turn-off just east of Doman on the Langtang trek.

### Option 1: Thulo Bharkhu to Thulo Syabru

4–5 hours, 340m ascent, 340m descent

About 100m north of Thulo Bharkhu the road crosses a small stream with water-driven mills. Leave the road and climb steeply to the schoolhouse, then continue up a stone staircase. The walk eventually becomes a delightful – and occasionally level – hike through pine and rhododendron forests to Dau Danda, a single teashop in the forest. At the Tamang village of **Brabal** (2200m) there are two simple lodges. Most of the village is hidden behind a ridge.

After a short climb, the trail reaches a ridge crest, where the trek finally enters the Langtang Valley. There are views north to snowy peaks in Tibet, west to Ganesh Himal (7406m) and east to Naya Kangri (5846m). A short, steep descent through bamboo forests leads to **Thulo Syabru** (2260m).

### Option 2: Doman to Thulo Syabru

2 hours, 570m ascent, 40m descent

Fifteen minutes east of Doman on the Langtang Valley trail, a path branches right off the main trail at an unmarked **junction** (1730m; N 28° 09.038', E 085° 22.421'). Climb steeply, first on switchbacks and then stone steps, to a friendly teashop at **U Kyang** (2040m; pronounced 'You Chiang'). The trail drops gradually to a steel truss bridge across the Ghopche Khola. After a frustrating initial descent, the trail climbs for an hour or so past a couple of lodges to the lower part of Thulo Syabru, strung along the ridge.

### Option 3: Syabrubesi to Thulo Syabru

2–3 hours, 750m ascent

From Syabrubesi follow the first 30 minutes of the main Langtang trail and 15 minutes after crossing the bridge to the south side of the Langtang Khola, branch right, climbing continually to eventually reach fields at the top of Thulo Syabru.

and rhododendrons for about one hour to a small clearing, then another hour to a very basic teahouse where there are views back down the valley. The trail continues to climb to the ridge and a trail junction at **Dimsa** (3030m). Turn right and continue up past an army camp, then up through scrub and oaks to Sing Gompa, near the top of the ridge in an area of dead trees. Do not take the inviting-looking trail that descends steeply to an apple farm.

## Day 2: Sing Gompa to Laurebina Yak

2–3 hours, 590m ascent

The trail climbs steeply up a ridge that marks a transition zone between rich, moist mountain forests on the northern slopes and dry scrub vegetation on the slopes that face south. Remember to look back for views

of the village framed by the snowcapped Ganesh Himal. The area on the northern slope is a sanctuary for the red panda, an endangered species that the Nepalis call the 'cat bear'. The trail crosses behind the ridge and stays in deep forests for a while, then emerges onto a saddle at **Chalang Pati** (3550m), where the Langtang Lirung View and the Tibet Mountain View offer breakfast and a welcome cup of tea. From here on you are in the Gosainkund protected area, where the killing of animals, lighting of wood fires and grazing of goats are prohibited.

As the trail ascends, there are outstanding views across the Langtang Valley to Langtang Lirung. There are a few goths along the way to the lodges at **Laurebina Yak** (3920m; N 28° 05.555', E 085° 22.788'). The Mount Rest is the first and easily the best place to stay, with a bakery and awesome views



from the rooms (especially room 15). Five minutes above are the disappointing Maya, ABC and Morning View lodges. The views are truly magnificent – you can see the Annapurnas, Manaslu (8156m), the four peaks of the Ganesh Himal (with Paldor Peak), some enticing unnamed peaks in Tibet and finally Langtang Lirung. It's possible to continue to Gosainkund, and many people do, but it's wise to stay here to aid acclimatisation before ascending another 500m. The lodges are decent and you'll be treated to a spectacular view in the morning.

### Day 3: Laurebina Yak to Gosainkund

2–3 hours, 540m ascent

The trail ascends, now in alpine country above the treeline, up the ridge to a small concrete temple with a statue of Sakyamuni (45 minutes) and beyond to a pair of tall stone pillars that say 'Welcome to Gosainkund' – but you still have a lot more walking to do. Continue to goths for views of the waterfalls from the first of the lakes, Saraswati Kund, and the Indian pilgrim trails that lead here from the south. The trail leaves the ridge and heads high above the Trisuli Valley. This is not a trail for acrophobes; it is spooky and dangerous if snow-covered. Fortunately, it is on the sunny side of the hill, so the snow melts quickly. If there has been a lot of snow, it may not be possible to cross into Gosainkund. People have perished floundering in the deep snow here, so return to Dhunche if conditions are not good.

The trail climbs gently but continuously to a spur marked by prayer flags and two rock carvings of Ganesh, as the second lake in the chain, Bhairav Kund, comes into view. It's a further 35 minutes to the third and largest lake, **Gosainkund** (4400m). There are half a dozen lodges, a Shiva shrine, a helipad and numerous small stone shelters for pilgrims on the northwestern side of the lake. The Peaceful Lake, Hotel Lakeside and Hotel Namaste are the best lodges here. Considering the remote location, prices are surprisingly reasonable.

Gosainkund Lake has a black rock in the middle, said to be the head of Shiva. According to legend, Shiva created this high-altitude lake when he pierced a glacier with his trident (*trisul*) to obtain water to quench

his thirst after consuming poison gathered from the churning of the oceans (the poison is the reason why Shiva is depicted with a blue throat). There is a white rock under the water which is said to be the remnant of an ancient Shiva shrine. It is also said that the water from this lake disappears underground via a subterranean channel and surfaces in Kumbeshwar pool, next to the five-storey Shiva Temple in Patan, more than 60km away. Hundreds of people come here to worship and bathe during the full-moon festival each August.

It's easy to spend half a day and more here. For the best views of the lake climb the ridge behind the lodges to two **view-points** (4640m; 25 minutes) decorated with prayer flags. It takes about 45 minutes to circumambulate the lake, past hundreds of small cairns. Buddhists call the circumambulation a *kora*, while Hindus call it a *parikrama*; both faiths walk clockwise, and you should do the same.

For a longer half-day exploration it's possible to follow faint trails south from the southeast corner of the lake to a series of smaller half-frozen lakes: Dudh Kund (Milk Lake), Chandra Kund (Moon Lake), Ragat Kund (Blood Lake) and finally **Ama Kund** (Mother Lake; 4540m; N 28° 04.039', E 085° 25.314'), along with views of Chhyarkung Chuli peak to the right.

### Day 4: Gosainkund to Gopte

6–7½ hours, 300m ascent, 1320m descent

The trail traverses the northern side of Gosainkund Lake and climbs on a rocky trail marked with cairns towards the pass. Passing three more small lakes, the trail finally reaches **Laurebina La** (4610m; N 28° 04.386', E 085° 25.773') after about 90 minutes. Take some time to explore the surrounding hills for some fine views, including over large Surya Kund (Sun Lake) just to the southwest.

From the pass, the trail descends alongside a stream through alpine country for 45 minutes to 'High Camp', a very basic seasonal lodge at **Bera Goth** (4230m; N 28° 03.930', E 085° 26.735'). Don't take the upper trail that leads eastward just beyond here. This is a direct route to Tharepati that has several very steep parts that are extremely dangerous when there is any snow on the trail, and there is no food or accommodation until you reach Tharepati. Local people, and the



national park administration, advise against taking this trail. Follow the lower, safer trail along a rough, knee-busting route that descends for an hour down the middle of the valley to **Phedi** (3740m; N 28° 03.444', E 085° 27.475'), three hours from Gosainkund.

The basic Hotel Dawa Baby at Phedi is a decent place for lunch, or continue downhill for a couple of minutes to the even simpler Surya Kunda Phedi, beside the Tasmell Khola. Accommodation at both places is very basic. In 1992 a Thai International airbus got lost in the clouds and crashed into the hillside just below Phedi. The concrete *chorten* beside the Dawa Baby is a memorial to a Japanese victim of the crash.

From Phedi the route drops to a stream then climbs through scrub bamboo to a crest at 3750m. The trail crosses the head of the valley on a rocky trail that's particularly hard on the ankles and toes, descending on the lower path (look for the arrows) across moraines to a dry stream (3620m) at the base of a steep 70m climb up eroded scree to the Kasturee Danda (musk deer ridge). By this point you'll likely be drenched in sweat.

Beyond a tiny seasonal teashop, the trail descends for an hour through forests, climbing in and out of ravines below the towering cliffs of Thare Danda. On one of these ridges look for some prayer flags; just beyond these is **Gopte** (3440m; N 28° 02.080', E 085° 28.891'). The two lodges here, the Namaste and Mendo, are wooden rat-traps but they still get quite crowded in high season. This is a long and arduous day of trekking and most people don't have the energy to continue the 90 minutes to the much better lodges of Tharepati, visible on the far ridge. At night you can see the lights of Trisuli

Bazaar far below and Kathmandu's glow behind the hills to the southwest.

## Day 5: Gopte to Tharepati

1½ hours, 330m ascent

Descending from the ridge at Gopte, the trail makes numerous ups and downs across ravines and the boulders of old moraines, then makes a final ascent to **Tharepati** (3640m), on a windy ridge. There are several lodges below the ridge, and more lodges on the ridge itself (see p226). Take a moment to climb to the ridge top for early-morning views of Dorje Lakpa, Shisha Pangma and a line of peaks all the way to Khumbu. Here, the trail joins the Helambu circuit (see p226). You can trek steeply downhill to Malemchigaon and on to Tarke Gyang, or go directly down the ridge to Kathmandu via Pati Bhanjyang.

The 'new' high trail from Bera Goth rejoins the trail here. If you are walking from Sundarimal to Gosainkund, take the lower trail via Phedi. The dangerous snow-covered parts of the high trail are on the northwest slopes, and not visible from this point. Several trekkers have taken the high route and had to return all the way to Tharepati when it became impossible to proceed.

This is a short stage; you can hang out and take in the view, head down the hill to Malemchigaon and Helambu, or start back to Kathmandu. If you want to return directly to Kathmandu, the days work out as follows:

## Day 6: Tharepati to Gul Bhanjyang

5–6 hours, 210m ascent, 1650m descent

See Day 3 of the Helambu Circuit (p226), walking it in reverse through Magin Goth, Panghu and Khutumsang.

### A QUESTION OF PERSPECTIVE Stan Armington

I climbed the trail to Kasturee Danda, which looks so forbidding from Phedi, in the snow, following steps the trek cook had cut with his kitchen knife. Another sherpa led the way, tossing gravel onto the snow and into the steps to provide a footing on the hard and slippery surface. As I sat at the top of the ridge taking photographs, I was wondering how to describe this particular stretch of trail. Was it dangerous or impassable in winter? My musing was interrupted by a sadhu in bare feet and loincloth who carried only a blanket, a brass bowl and an iron *trisul*. He was on his way to Gosainkund for a day and would return two days hence. Off he went down the trail, closely followed by a Nepali in gumboots who strode along listening to a football match on a radio – the only item he was carrying. These apparitions add a bit of perspective to the trail. Just be careful, go slowly and travel with reliable companions.

*Stan Armington is the author of previous editions of Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya*



## LOST IN THE HIMALAYAS

In December 1991, James Scott, a young Australian medical student, left Phedi to cross the Laurebina La to Gosainkund. When snow started to fall, limiting visibility, he turned back for Phedi. In the conditions he wandered off the track and followed a creek until he became trapped below the ridge line that the trail follows from Tharepati through Gopte to Phedi. He soon gave up hope of walking out and waited to be rescued. Remarkably, he was rescued, but not for 43 days, by which time he was nearly dead from starvation. The whole story reads like an object lesson of what not to do, but in similar conditions many trekkers could quickly find themselves in an equally difficult situation.

James' mistakes included making a difficult trek at a tricky time of year – he was attempting to cross a 4600m pass late in the season when snowfalls can be sudden and dangerous. He was not trekking with a familiar and reliable partner – the friend he had set out with had turned back due to an injury and he had only met his new partner a couple of days earlier. He became lost by following a creek, an easy trap for the unwary: trails in Nepal generally follow ridges; creeks will usually bring you to a waterfall or some other dead end. While lost, his problem was compounded by having only limited food supplies – the famous bar of chocolate – since he originally intended to make the easier Helambu Circuit, where there are frequent villages.

James was lost between Gopte and Talu, which are only 2.5km apart. Trekkers in Nepal soon realise that distance is less important than altitude, and the 1000m elevation difference between Talu (2500m) and Gopte (3500m) is a far more important factor than an initial glance at the map would suggest.

## Day 7: Gul Bhanjyang to Chisopani

5–6 hours, 970m ascent, 970m descent

If you pressed on from Tharepati to Khutumsang on Day 5, you might be able to get all the way to Kathmandu in a day, but the view of the Himalaya from Chisopani is good enough to justify a night here. Beware of thieves in Chisopani if you are camping.

## Day 8: Chisopani to Sundarikal

5–6 hours, 150m ascent, 1150m descent

Follow Day 1 of the Helambu Circuit (p224), in reverse, to Borlang Bhanjyang (2440m), then trek down the Shivapuri ridge to the road at Sundarikal.

From Sundarikal, you can get a taxi or bus back to Kathmandu.

Despite the proximity of Kathmandu, the trails are blissfully quiet, particularly compared to the more famous trekking routes around Everest and Annapurna. In just one week, you can loop around from Sundarikal to Thimbu or Kiul, passing mountain viewpoints, alpine meadows and Buddhist villages – it's a good taster trek if you are unsure about trekking higher up in the Himalaya.

Alternatively, you can tack Helambu onto the end of the Langtang or Gosainkund trek, crossing into Helambu via the high-altitude passes at Laurebina La (4610m) or Ganja La (5106m). However, both routes involve steep gains in altitude, particularly if you start from Helambu. AMS is a serious risk and the passes are snow-covered and dangerous in winter.

# HELAMBU

Circling the valley of the Melamchi Khola, just 75km north of Kathmandu, the Helambu area is surprisingly peaceful and calm. The landscape is classic Himalayan foothills, with plenty of dramatic rises and plummeting descents, but there are no overbooked flights to worry about at the end of the trek – you can just hop on the bus or jump into a taxi.

## PLANNING Accommodation

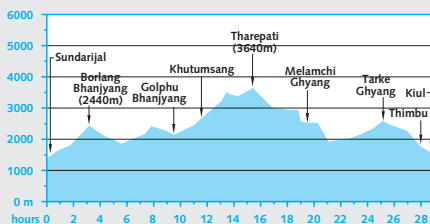
All the lodges in Helambu charge Rs 100 to Rs 150 per person. Meals are available for around Rs 300 and beers go for Rs 250. Shared bathrooms are usually outside the main building – keep your coat, shoes and torch handy for night-time toilet trips.

## When to Trek

Because the elevation rarely exceeds 3500m, it is possible to trek in Helambu from



## Helambu Circuit



October to May, but be prepared for snow at Tharepati in winter.

### GATEWAYS

#### Sundarijal

☎ 01 / elevation 1350m

The main starting point for the Helambu trek, Sundarijal is just a short bus or taxi ride from Kathmandu. Most people start walking the same day, but if you do feel inclined to stop over, the **Base Camp Resort** (☎ 4800206; r Rs 400-700) offers comfortable rooms and a lovely garden restaurant, overlooking the confluence of two streams.

Local buses run regularly from Kathmandu's Ratna Park bus stand to Sundarijal (Rs 50, one hour). Alternatively, take a taxi for Rs 800. If you feel like walking from Kathmandu, it's only 7km from Bodhnath along a level, partly surfaced road.

#### Kiul & Thimbu

Depending on the condition of the road, buses run up the valley of the Melamchi Khola as far as Kiul or Thimbu. You can start or end the Helambu trek at either of these two tiny villages, but facilities are basic and transport options limited.

In Kiul, you have the choice of the rudimentary Yagrima Hotel & Lodge and the no-name teashop opposite. Both offer rooms for Rs 100, plus simple Nepali meals. If buses are running as far as Thimbu, the Riverside Lodge is the best of a mediocre bunch.

Four buses run daily between Kathmandu's Ratna Park and Kiul (Rs 150, five to six hours), continuing to Thimbu if the road is clear. If no bus materialises, you could always try hitching a ride with one of the maintenance vehicles from the Melamchi Water Supply Project.

## HELAMBU CIRCUIT

**Duration** 6 days

**Max Elevation** 3640m

**Difficulty** easy-medium

**Season** October to April

**Start/Finish** Sundarijal (left) or Kiul (left)/Thimbu (left)

**Summary** Trek close to Kathmandu through dense forests, Buddhist villages and alpine meadows with soaring mountain views.

The closest trek to Kathmandu, this week-long hike passes cascading terraces, Sherpa villages, alpine meadows, rhododendron forests and mountain viewpoints. It's a great sampler for what the rest of Nepal has to offer. The easiest place to begin the trek is the village of Sundarijal, but you can also start from Kiul or Thimbu in the valley of the Melamchi Khola.

### THE TREK (SEE MAPS PP208-9)

#### Day 1: Sundarijal to Chisopani

3½-4½ hours, 1150m ascent, 150m descent

From the bus stand at Sundarijal (1350m), a wide and obvious trail climbs up beside the enormous water pipe that supplies Kathmandu with drinking water from a reservoir inside Shivapuri National Park. A new pipeline is under construction to pump water 26km underground from the Melamchi Khola Valley – see p43.

The first stage of the trek climbs steeply to the entry checkpoint for the 112-sq-km **Shivapuri National Park** (admission Rs 250, camping fee Rs 100), where a side trail turns off to the riverside Sundari Mai temple. Continue uphill through the forest to a curious dam that looks like a clockwork prop from the movie



### HELAMBU CIRCUIT – TIMES

The following are trekking times only; stops are not included.

Day	Section	Hours
1	Sundarjal to Borlang Bhanjyang	3:00
	Borlang Bhanjyang to Chisopani	1:00
2	Chisopani to Pati Bhanjyang	1:30
	Pati Bhanjyang to Thotong	3:00
	Thotong to Golphu Bhanjyang	0:30
3	Golphu Bhanjyang to Khutumsang	2:00
	Khutumsang to Magin Goth	3:00
	Magin Goth to Tharepati	1:30
4	Tharepati to trail junction	2:00
	Trail junction to Melamchi Ghyang	2:00
5	Melamchi Ghyang to Nakote	2:30
	Nakote to Dozum	1:45
	Dozum to Tarke Ghyang	0:45
6	Tarke Ghyang to Kakani	2:15
	Kakani to Thimbu	0:45
	Thimbu to Kiul	1:00

**Wild Wild West.** Beyond the dam, the trail climbs to meet a dirt road at 1660m. Follow the signposted trail uphill to the large Tamang village of **Mulkharka** (1800m).

From a cluster of teashops at the top of Mulkharka, there are sweeping views over the Kathmandu Valley – on a clear day, you might even see planes taking off from Tribhuvan airport. The trail continues to climb past an abandoned hospital and helipad and enters a straggly rhododendron forest, reaching the pass at Borlang Bhanjyang (2440m) in around 1½ hours.

The rest of the day is all downhill through peaceful forests of brown oak and rhododendron. Within the hour, you'll reach a wide 4WD track running uphill to **Chisopani** (2140m). This untidy place feels more like a road junction than a proper mountain village, but the mountain views are excellent. Note the revolutionary propaganda daubed on walls – one banner reads 'Long live Marxism, Leninism, Maoism, and Prach-andapath!'. Theft has been a problem here in the past so watch your gear.

The large concrete Hotel Mountain at the start of Chisopani is usually the busiest place and it offers rooms with private bathrooms. However, facilities are just as good at the neighbouring Hotel BBC, Hotel Annapurna Mountain View and Lama Dorje

Lakpa Hotel. All the hotels offer similar menus of dal bhat, chow mein, noodle soup, fried potatoes and fried Tibetan bread.

### Day 2: Chisopani to Golphu Bhanjyang

5–6 hours, 890m ascent, 970m descent

As you leave Chisopani, you'll be asked to show your TIMS card, so keep it handy. The trail runs out of the village and continues level among pine plantations on the top of the spur. There are good mountain views as you leave the wide 4WD track and drop down into the valley on a muddy zigzagging path.

Halfway down the slope, the trail meets another dirt road – turn left then follow a series of short cuts to reach the Brahman and Chhetri village of **Pati Bhanjyang** (1770m). The village has several teashops and lodges – the best rooms are at the rustic Pati Bhanjyang Shivapuri Lodge and the brightly painted Deep Sindhu Lodge in the middle of the village.

The trail heads north out of Pati Bhanjyang, climbing from this low saddle on a wide track cut crudely into the hillside. It's a gentle ascent to a small white *chorten* at the Sherpa village of Thakuni Bhanjyang, where the gleaming white Lama Guest House offers comfortable rooms and hearty meals served on a terrace overlooking the valley.

Climb steeply uphill past the lodge to meet a larger trail, then bear right on crumbly stone steps to reach the much larger village of **Chipling** (2170m). There are several lodges, including the cheerful Lama Guest House, which boasts a warm indoor sun lounge and an airy covered terrace.

After Chipling, the trail rises through fields and secondary growth forest. Take the middle path at the first junction and climb for 200m past a series of ruined stone huts to the village of **Lapchu Danda** (2420m), a single row of houses at the top of the Jhoin Danda ridge. There are several lodges here, but all are overpriced and none are especially appealing.

If the sky is clear, you'll have good views of the peaks as you drop down through rhododendron forest on the far side of the pass. Turn right when you reach the wide 4WD track and you'll roll into **Thotong** (Thodang Betini), a friendly, sprawling Tamang



### THE SHERPAS OF HELAMBU

The tribal people of upper Helambu are often described as Sherpas, but they call themselves Yolmo, after the original name for the Helambu Valley. Like the Sherpas of the Khumbu region, the Yolmo came to Nepal from the Tibetan plateau in the 15th century, settling in Tarke Ghyang and other villages around the Melamchi Khola. The Yolmo use the cursive Ume script, which is still used for handwritten texts in Tibet, and speak their own language, Yolmo, which is quite different to the Sherpa language of Khumbu. For more information, see [www.yolmo.org.np](http://www.yolmo.org.np).

village at 2260m. The Tamang, or Murmi, are rumoured to be descendants of 'horse warriors' from the Tibetan plateau, and many Tamang continue this warrior tradition by serving as Gurkha soldiers.

There are numerous lodges here. The Thodhong Lama Lodge is painted with colourful Buddhist murals by local artist Kumar Theeng, who seems to have painted every lodge in Helambu! A few steps further along the trail, the stone-fronted Hotel Green Hill View is another good choice, with tasty food and a big front garden.

Below Thotong, the path drops for another 30 minutes to the Tamang village of **Golphu Bhanjyang** (Gul Bhanjyang; 2140m), passing below a gleaming white *chorten*. Facing each other across the narrow single street are the Gosai Kund Lodge and Himalaya New Lodge. Both have well-stocked shops, clean rooms and restaurants serving filling portions of dal bhat. There are more lodges on the outskirts of the village. If it's a clear evening, stroll up to the *chorten* you passed earlier for good views towards the mountains.

### Day 3: Golphu Bhanjyang to Tharepati

6–7 hours, 1650m ascent, 210m descent

This is the most dramatic stage of the trek, with views that become increasingly epic as the day goes on. However, the climb is steep and sustained. You'll work up a sweat climbing the 1650m to Tharepati and then face a sudden chill once you encounter the icy winds at the pass.

Starting from Golphu Bhanjyang, climb the hill to a small saddle and look for a path like a stream gully cutting uphill to the right (north) at N 27° 54.253', E 085° 28.754'. If you reach a wide stream with a water-powered mill, you've gone too far. The path climbs over crumbly schist to the modest, bungalow-style Khutumsang Guest House, then rises to the prayer-flag-draped lawn of the Dragon Lodge, a quiet hideaway with good views. Continue over a small pass at 2580m, where two small *bhattis* serve hot tea and packet noodle soup.

On the far side of the ridge, the trail passes below a menacing-looking black granite cliff, and then drops rapidly through boulder-strewn meadows full of cows with tinkling metal bells. Follow the chimes to reach **Khutumsang** (2450m), a collection of half a dozen lodges surrounding the Langtang National Park office.

As you enter Khutumsang, the large stone Mountain View Hotel is tidy, well-run and popular with trekking groups. Hotel Namaste at the other end of the village has an enticing stove heater, fed with leftovers from the owners' farm. The park ranger will probably find you before you reach the office to make sure you've paid the Rs 1000 entry fee.

The trek proceeds due north past a big white *chorten* towards a ridge that seems dauntingly high and distant from this point. The trail ducks in and out of fir and rhododendron forests, passing isolated farms and a single *bhatti* at **Panghu**. As you climb the Yurin Danda ridge, the sawtooth peaks above Langtang and Gosainkund soar into view.

Eventually, after a climb that seems to go on forever, the trail summits the **Mere Danda** (3510m). You'll pass many locals hauling enormous loads of bamboo over the pass. About three hours after leaving Khutumsang, you'll drop down to the appealing village of **Magin Goth** (Magen Goth; 3285m). The cosiest lodge here is the large, log-cabin style Hotel Green View & Lodge, set on a densely forested saddle about 300m before the main village. There are fabulous views from here to the rocky Thare Danda ridge, where a rugged trail climbs to Gosainkund.

In the village itself are the almost identical courtyard-style Lama Hotel and



Darjeeling Lodge & Hotel, which promises to serve 'good tea'. Above Magin Goth, the trail climbs steeply through dense pine forest passing several *chortens* and ruined huts. Eventually, the houses of Tharepati appear at the end of the ridge, but it's a steep, two-hour climb to reach the village.

Hovering beneath a jaw-dropping curtain of Himalayan peaks, **Tharepati** (3640m) consists of four stone lodges scattered across an alpine meadow. A steep path rises above the village to a fluttering white prayer flag on a windswept hilltop, offering a perfect panorama of the Langtang Himalaya. The saddle is exposed to the mountain winds, and it can be desperately cold up here in winter.

The same track continues northwest towards Gosainkund, but this is a crude and dangerous path that even locals avoid. The safe route to Gosainkund runs downhill from the village and stays low on the ridge. If you decide to follow this route, be sure to factor in the altitude – many trekkers develop AMS by climbing too fast on this trail.

Lodges in Tharepati are fairly standard for the trek – stone houses with heated dining rooms and basic wooden box rooms. The smartest place is the Sumchho Top Lodge at the north end of the village, which basks in front of the mountain panorama. Next to each other at the start of the village, the substantial New Yak Yati Hotel and

Hotel Gosainkunda are more inviting than the Hotel Tashi Delek at the bottom of the saddle, by the turn-off to Gopte.

## Day 4: Tharepati to Melamchi Ghyang

3–4 hours, 1160m descent, 100m ascent

Heading east from Tharepati, the trail drops rapidly down the ridge, quickly losing those wonderful mountain views. Pick up the path below the Sumchho Top Lodge, then plunge through a forest of gnarled mossy pines and drop down along a knife-edge ridge. At first, the scenery is rather beautiful, but with no views to show you how far you have come, it soon becomes monotonous.

Eventually, the path meets a waterlogged cattle track running downhill to the left (a stone cairn and broken tree stump mark the junction at N 28° 00.543', E 085° 30.456'). Follow the track downhill to the very tip of the spur and cross the left-hand stream on a log bridge. The trail follows the north bank through an open rhododendron forest before dropping past *chortens* and scattered meadows full of ruined goths.

The last stage of the walk is an unforgiving drop on an almost vertical trail that will teach you the meaning of the word 'impact'. On the way, you can detour south on a side path to an open area with a large crag allegedly used as a throne by Guru Rinpoche. Eventually, you'll emerge from the forest at

### IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF GURU RINPOCHE

Also known as Padmasambhava, the Indian mystic Guru Rinpoche is credited with introducing Buddhism to Tibet and Bhutan in the 8th century on an epic grand tour of the Himalaya. The exact route he followed is hotly debated, but residents of Helambu believe that the Guru was a frequent visitor to Melamchi Ghyang, leaving his mark at several locations around the village.

As well as sitting in the stone throne near the path to Tharepati, the saint is believed to have meditated in the small cave at the top of Melamchi Ghyang, taken tea near the cliff wall below the village and washed his clothes in a stream behind the village school. Locals still venerate the Guru by leaving offerings of prayer flags at all these locations.

There are many other sites in Helambu linked to Padmasambhava, who can easily be recognised by the three human heads impaled on his spear, representing the three *kayas* or metaphysical states of the Buddha. For a detailed breakdown of sacred Guru Rinpoche sites in Yolmo, download a PDF of Aryn Baker's *Pilgrim's Progress* from <http://www.melamchi.com/sacred.htm>.

Melamchi is also linked to the Tibetan poet and yogi Milarepa, who is said to have meditated in a cave on the east bank of the Melamchi River in the 11th century, composing the uplifting poem 'Song of a Yogi's Joy'. A new gumpa has been built on the site by lamas from Bodhnath – you can get here from Melamchi Ghyang in around two hours, but you'll need to ask for directions to find the trail.



a long suspension bridge on the outskirts of **Melamchigaon** (Melamchigaon; 2530m).

After the tiny hamlets so far along the trail, Melamchi feels like a teeming metropolis. As well as raising goats and cattle and tending fields of barley, corn and potatoes, many local families run shops in far-away Ladakh during the short Kashmiri summer. As a result, the village is surprisingly prosperous, with reliable electricity piped in from the hydroelectric plant near Tarke Ghyang.

Although it seems far older, Melamchi was actually founded in 1859 by the head lama of Bodhnath stupa. In the centre of the village is a large, renovated **gompa** containing statues of Guru Rinpoche, Sakyamuni and Chenresig (Avalokitesvara). According to legend, the Guru frequented several locations around Melamchi, including the cave at the top of the village.

The village is also associated with the Tibetan poet Milarepa, who is said to have meditated in a cave on the east bank of the Melamchi River in the 11th century. A new gompa has been built on the site by lamas from Bodhnath – ask for directions in Melamchi to find the trail. Another rewarding trek near Melamchi is the strenuous day hike to Ama Yangri.

There are plenty of lodges in Melamchi Ghyang so you can afford to be choosy. In the centre of the village are the delightful Tashi Dhelek Lodge, with a sunny balcony facing right onto the gompa, and the agreeably rustic Himalaya Lama Lodge, set in a sprawling market garden. Just downhill is the charming Eco Friendly Home, with neat wooden rooms, a snug communal dining room and a marigold-filled front terrace looking out over the valley. There are four more lodges at the top end of the village.

## Day 5: Melamchi Ghyang to Tarke Ghyang

5–6 hours, 610m descent, 670m ascent

Heading on from Melamchi Ghyang, you have two options. Some trekkers descend directly to Thimbu and Kiul at the bottom of the valley, but it's more interesting to cross the river and climb to the atmospheric stone village of Tarke Ghyang on the east side of the Melamchi Khola.

From the gompa in Melamchi Ghyang, the trail drops rapidly into the forest, passing a series of large *chortens*, a reminder of

the strong Buddhist influence in this valley. After passing a small tea house, you'll reach an important junction (N 28° 00.605', E 085° 31.884'). The large trail running south along the valley leads to Thimbu; the small trail winding down to the river leads to Tarke Ghyang.

Follow this grassy path down to the suspension bridge, passing the River Side Lodge, tucked between a white *chorten* and an enormous boulder. After crossing the bridge, the trail climbs steeply up the east side of the valley to the sprawling village of **Nakote** (1980m), centred on a large **gompa** with a flagstone courtyard and a curious stone column carved with a human face.

From the gompa, continue level out of the village to a large yellow-and-white *chorten* (N 28° 00.279', E 085° 32.315'). The most obvious trail continues south along the valley to Thimbu, while the path to Tarke Ghyang turns abruptly up the hill past the village school. It's a long, hot climb to the small hamlet of **Dozum** (2320m), where the farmhouse-style Sherpa Lodge offers valley views and tasty meals prepared with fresh garden vegetables.

*Mani* walls and *chortens* mark the route onwards to the gompa at **Chiri**, set just off the trail above an ancient stepped stone *chorten*. You'll pass two more *chortens* as you climb on slippery log steps to the outskirts of **Tarke Ghyang** (2590m).

With its narrow cobbled lanes and tightly packed houses, Tarke resembles the high-altitude villages of Mustang, Dolpo and Ladakh, reflecting the mountain origins of the Yolmo tribe. The carved windows and balconies on some houses date back to the 18th century, though wealthier families are slowly replacing these worm-eaten relics with new timbers.

The village takes its name from the huge, square *ghyang* (monastery) in the middle of the village. This is the oldest monastery in Helambu and a sign warns against carrying out 'nasty works' inside this venerated monument. A number of local families sell 'antiques' but most are modern copies, aged over smoky fires.

Since the construction of the road to Kiul and Thimbu, Tarke Ghyang has fallen off the main trekking circuit, but there are still some good places to stay, including the cheerful Mount View Hotel at the start of



## THE ROAD TO SERMATHANG

Once a popular stop on the Helambu Circuit, the village of Sermathang has been left stranded by the new road along the Melamchi Valley. To bring business back to the village, local residents have chipped together to build their own road, linking Sermathang to Melamchi Pul Bazaar at the bottom of the valley. If the proposed bus service along this road materialises, Sermathang may again become an important start or end point for Helambu treks.

To reach Sermathang from Tarke Ghyang, take the upper path by the Tarkeyghyang Hotel and trek through the Buddhist villages of Setighyang and Gangyul to reach the unfinished road running north from Sermathang (2610m) in around 3½ hours. The village has three large gompas and good rooms at the Mountain View Lodge, and the Yangri Lodge, Karma Lodge and Helambu Lodge in the lower part of the village.

If you decide to tag Sermathang onto the existing Helambu Circuit, you can follow an easy short cut down the spur to Kiul, starting near the Karma Lodge (two hours).

the village. The house is set in a large walled garden and there's a phone for local and international calls. At the far end of the village is **Hotel Tarkeyghyang** ([www.geocities.com/hoteltarkeyghyang](http://www.geocities.com/hoteltarkeyghyang)), an atmospheric timber building with a dark but cosy dining room, a big communal balcony and a huge front lawn.

## SIDE TRIP: AMA YANGRI

4–5 hours, 1200m ascent, 1200m descent

Tarke Ghyang is a good place to take a rest day and climb **Ama Yangri** (3771m), the *chorten*-topped peak directly north of the village. The mountain is worshipped as the protector deity of the valley and hundreds of Yolmo people gather at the summit in the Nepali month of Chaitra (March or April) to pay their respects.

From the top of Tarke Ghyang, it's a gruelling 1200m climb through pine and rhododendron forests to the summit, passing the small **Gekye Gompa** at 3020m. From the top of Ama Yangri, there are knee-trembling views north to Langtang and west towards Kanchenjunga. This ascent forms the first stage of the savage five-day trek along the Yangri Danda ridge to the 5106m Ganja La and Langtang (see p216). Retrace your footsteps to Tarke Ghyang.

## Day 6: Tarke Ghyang to Thimbu/Kiul

3–4 hours, 1310m descent

To finish the Helambu Circuit on the most popular path, pick up the signposted trail

to Thimbu just beyond the Tarkeyghyang Hotel (turning left here will take you up along the ridge to Sermathang). The trail drops gently along the east side of the valley, passing through broken rhododendron forest. Assorted *chortens*, shrines and *mani* walls provide visual interest as you drop to the Sherpa village of **Kakani** at 2070m, which has another small gompa.

From here, the path descends more steeply. About three hours after leaving Tarke Ghyang, you'll drop into **Thimbu** at 1580m (see p224). Depending on the state of the road, you may be able to take the bus directly to Kathmandu or you can walk on to **Kiul** (1280m) in around one hour.

# OTHER TREKS

## PANCH POKHARI

A little-followed camping trek above the Indrawati Valley climbs through remote country to the Hindu and Buddhist pilgrimage centre of Panch Pokhari (Five Lakes), set at 4100m in the foothills of the Jugal Himalaya. Most trekkers take seven days to reach the lakes, starting in the village of Chautara, accessible by bus from Kathmandu. It's a further four days downhill to Melamchi Pul Bazaar. The trek passes through Langtang National Park, so you must pay the Rs 1000 park fee. Nepa Maps' 1:40,000 *Panch Pokhari* map covers the route in detail.



