

Annapurna Base Camp Trek, Lisa Colloby, Sept/Oct 2007

The Nepalese trekking season begins in earnest in October. The advantage of heading off into the mountains before then is that the trails are blissfully quiet. The disadvantage is that the weather can be a little unpredictable...

It was late September when I set off to trek the Annapurna Sanctuary trail. The first three days were exactly as I had hoped. Starting in Naya Pul, we climbed up and down long series of steep stone steps, winding our way through rice and millet terraces, a vivid green in the bright sun. Gaining height through dense forest of rhododendron and bamboo, butterflies of all shapes and colours fluttered around us and we spotted inquisitive langur monkeys peering down at us from their high branches. Every so often we would round a bend or emerge into a clearing and I would do a double take as one of the distant Annapurna peaks appeared, dazzling snow against the blue sky. Setting off at 7.30 a.m. each day, we reached our cosy teahouse destinations by mid afternoon to wolf down huge portions of dal bhat and relax our overstretched muscles in the sun. We spent the first night in Hille and night 2 in Ghorepani, allowing us to make an exciting pre-dawn hike up to the nearby Poon Hill viewpoint on morning 3, from where we were treated to a magnificent sunrise over the mountain range.

On day 4 I awoke before the alarm. The enthusiastic wake-up call had come from the patter of rain on the roof and, anxiously lifting the curtain in my room, I saw that the stunning view had been swallowed by billows of heavy cloud. The monsoon was officially over but it seemed some stray clouds had gathered and burst over the Annapurnas. Knowing that monsoon downpours pass after a couple of hours I was happy enough to don waterproofs and pack my sunglasses within reach for later in the day. Ha! Swimming goggles would have been more appropriate! Three days later there had not been so much as a pause in the rain, I had accepted plodding on in saturated gear and the trail had become a combination of deep mud, running water and treacherous wet mossy rocks. (I later learned that this was a freak episode as it had rained continuously for 59 hours: a 30 year record in Nepal.)

Despite the weather I was still enjoying myself. While the dramatic snowy peaks were hidden, the scenery was still beautiful in a misty, atmospheric kind of way with layers of hazy, green slopes cut through with waterfalls, reminiscent of a Japanese painting. Even the bloodthirsty leeches, out in force with the rain, weren't bothering me: my experienced guide had sprinkled salt around my sock rims as a deterrent.

Over the next couple of days, up to Tadapani and on to Chomrong, the trail became even more of an adventure as we crossed waterfall ledges and angry streams, sometimes on rickety log bridges, more often balancing precariously on stepping stones. Rising to 3,700 metres on day 6, a gain of 1100 metres, I could feel the altitude kicking in as breathing became a little harder and the uphill gradient became more of a challenge. We overnighted at the base camp for Machapuchhre, known as 'Fishtail' mountain because of its distinctive shape but now frustratingly covered in cloud.

Then the miracle occurred! On day 7 we reached Annapurna Base Camp (4130 metres) with limited visibility, but later in the day, as we huddled together with a great sense of camaraderie over mugs of hot tea, the clouds gradually lifted. For an hour we were blessed with a jaw-dropping 360 degree panorama in this incredible mountain amphitheatre, surrounded by towering snow covered giants glittering against the blue backdrop. It was one of the most spellbinding sights I have ever experienced. Then, suddenly, the clouds rolled up from the green valley below and within seconds the magic show was over, the vista was gone.

Retracing our steps over the next two days, the rain was, again, relentless and as a result the trail was even harder to negotiate than during our ascent. It was on day 9, when I slipped a couple of times that I was in danger of having a sense of humour failure but luckily my alert guide, Bam, was able to pull me back up and make me laugh again. I was in good hands!

Then, in Chomrong, on the evening of day 9, the sky began to change... After some rumbling thunder and a few flashes of lightning a rainbow appeared, then a second one and slowly the clouds thinned and parted, revealing the full view across to the valley through which we had walked up and back, with the mighty white mountains standing out in all their glory. It was stunning.

The final three days of walking, from Chomrong to the interesting Gurung village of Ghandruk and on to Phedi, were dry and clear and even though we were retreating from the Sanctuary, we enjoyed a succession of fabulous mountain views.

So... was it worth it? Absolutely. Although the rain made the going tough at times, it also added to the adventure and the huge sense of achievement and I felt marvelously energized afterwards. But, above all, what made it worth every step of the trek in and out was the reward of that brief but intoxicating encounter with the some of the highest mountains on earth at ABC: sheer, unadulterated joy.