

# Savour the simple pleasures of Nepal on trek to a lake made of snow

**Path to hidden glacier takes hikers from old rhythms to ancient forests**

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Working to survive: A Nepalese man uses a crude plough to till the soil for vegetables. People in remote villages live to a ripe old age due to clean air, a healthy diet, and energetic lifestyles. Picture: JO RUSHBY

Dreams are made of this: flying into a landlocked country where a few years ago Maoist guerrillas roamed and a royal family played out Machiavellian intrigues that would culminate in blood and death.

Kathmandu. Backpack. Boots. A foot trek of six days. Sleeping rough, walking tough, with promises of glaciers, spectacular mountains, remote villages. Oh, and leeches. The excitement about Himalayan adventures, however, overwhelms worries about blood-suckers and soggy boots.

Kathmandu to Pokhara. A dressed-up bus chugs into view and we are on our way along narrow, winding roads flanked by hills of terraced, emerald rice paddies. No toll roads, no One-Stops. But many stops for samosas, masala chai and lassis sold by roadside vendors.

Pokhara at sunset is like arriving in a wonderland. The light shimmers and speeds across a lake that hugs the town and disappears into the surrounding mountains. A path around the water is lined with cafes and bars, people boating, fishing, feasting. Chaos organised. Not Geneva, just nirvana.

Much Better Adventures is a well-oiled team, a mix of hardened Everest veterans and apprentices learning the trade. Our mission is Nepal's hidden glacier, an offshoot of the snow-capped Annapurna mountain range. Like children knowing there is a lollipop around the next hill, we leave the town just before light breaks, the Madi River keeping us company.

Jagan Timilsina is our guide, Tika and Chiiring our porters. Timilsina's reception in the valley's teahouses and villages tells of his 20 years of trekking in this neck of the woods. The last drips of our lunch have barely settled when he smilingly announces "5,000 steps to the next stop". Suddenly the dhal and rice feels a bit heavy around the midriff.

Memories of my training raise a laugh. The Durban promenade reinforced with running up and down stairs. I am as prepared as white South Africans were for the end of apartheid.

The humidity hangs low, seeping under clothes, working up dribbles of sweat. Halfway up, a man nonchalantly ploughs his thin strip of terrace with yoked oxen.



Top of the world: Visiting a hidden glacier in the snow-clad Annapurna massif is worth a walk on the wild side. Picture: YOUTUBE

A woman is waiting on her veranda, Tibetan beads hanging as heavy as a buffalo's harness. She waits for something to happen. Or nothing. The mother of the mule-driver, her hand clings resolutely to the wooden veranda as she shyly announces her age, "88: too old now".

A combination of steep paths, crisp air and healthy diet mean people here live well into their 80s and early 90s. Their energy is infectious; we try to keep up with a man and his cows returning home from a day's grazing to the village of Sikles.

Paths zigzag past stone houses, wooden balconies and intricate carvings. Prayer flags. Fountains. Gardens and fields of mealies and potatoes. The village clings to its gods. It is cut



off from the outside world during monsoon as the road slides into a mud-fest. So everyone mucks in; there is no retirement, there is too much to do. After the elderly can no longer bend in the fields, they are kept active on their verandas, spinning wool, weaving cloth or making myriad items from bamboo.

The year is 2075 according to the Nepalese calendar, but time seems to be standing still.

This most idyllic of settings, a place that time has refused to warp, produced the fearsome Gurkhas, soldiers of the empire. And all the while, modern ways are creeping in: Wi-Fi, one-minute noodles and plastic.

It's time to rest the feet. We are booked in at Namaste Guesthouse, run by the irrepressible Maila. Its flower-bedecked terrace hangs on the edge of the valley, looking over

a vegetable garden bursting with goodness. The menu is as simple as it is delectable, dhal and rice.

Outside children's voices play, smoke rises, cows are put to bed. If Pokhara was loose strands running off in different directions, Sikles is a tightly fitting garment, with its seasons and discipline of weeding, ploughing, planting and harvesting. We feast on vegetable curry and pickled radish. It's a heady combination that loosens the tongue and the bowels.

An excuse to go trekking and camping in the mountains proves too much for Maila. Bag packed, knife at the ready, he bounds into the forest, thrashing nettles that quickly regroup behind him. He fashions bamboo walking sticks as we twist and turn upwards through a forest of ancient trees, dripping with orchids, moss; creepers looping, tendrils falling.

Porter pace ensues as the midday steam drains our energy: slow and steady. Hugging precipitous slopes, the path rises and falls like a heartbeat, each rise a welcome chance to gulp breezy air, and descending again into the wooded calm, the tantalising roar of water in the distance slashing the silence. Suddenly the river opens up before us, monsoon rains swelling its banks. It is a chance to take off boots, cool feet, dispense with leeches. We cross wooden bridges, leap across Ice Age boulders upstream. And all the time just above the treeline are glimpses of the shining white peaks. Ever closer. We are now deep in a world of nature.

Hugu village is our resting place for the next few nights. We are in an assortment of sheds equipped with the basics. No one lives here, only the momentary footprints of hunters and travellers, the youngsters having abandoned old ways for new.

One couple remain in the village, eking out a seasonal existence by honey hunting. The husband reveals bear claw scars down his back. Somewhere in the forest, their furry presence suddenly looms. The bear attacked him in the forest and he survived only because his daughter carried him to safety.



High up in the Himalayas, reality is less about a cellphone signal and more about sleeping with one eye open while bears and leopards roam outside.

We camp out, light a fire, pluck potatoes from the earth and roast them. The food tastes pure, and we laugh nervously over hot rum toddies as darkness sweeps in and leopards think about supper.

A bamboo cow shed is a bedroom. It has no door.

Morning mists cloak the mountains and then clear. I hear the glacier before seeing it. Crashing rocks, cracking ice from some of the highest peaks in the world, Annapurna.

Kahphuche, "lake made of snow" appears, floating icebergs in the middle. We are 2,450m above sea level. I dip my fingers in, quickly pull them out. Two men walk out of the forest carrying packs and ropes. Hunting honey in the cliffs, they talk of bears swimming in the

lake. So we quickly head back to camp, spotting birds, Chiiring Sherpa teaching me Nepali words.

Silence descends on the group trekking back to Sikles. After six days, the village feels huge. Pokhara is a metropolis.

This trek, this Nepal, stretches beyond words. It's no Monaco or Disneyland. Here the adventures are raw. The people real. The radishes pick(1)ed from the back garden.

Buses more gaudy than a Bihari bride. Guides who every day share a forest with leopards and fight off bears.

Go — before this place is over-run by giddy tourists who will want tea-houses to become Starbucks, climb mountains in cable cars, turn waterfalls into slides and resting places into miniature Hiltons.

As I return home via Dubai, leeches appear again, this time their suckers reaching out to fill bloated money machines.

And I think, please take me back to the future – to 2075 and the Himalayas!

