



# Outdoor Life

News Editor Jay Gentile coordinates the Outdoor page. Call him with story ideas or suggestions at 586-3356.

## Hiking along the roof of the world

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JAY GENTILE

There I was — struggling for breath, feet like concrete, thighs on fire, spirits and energy draining like a leak in the gas tank.

And I was still in the first hour of my five-day trek of the Himalayan Langtang mountain range, just north of Kathmandu, Nepal.

"I'm just getting used to the altitude," I thought, beginning to feel better as the end of the steep incline we had been scaling drifted within view.

Then an 87-year old woman, barefoot with a 100-pound sack of rocks on her back blew past me.

Then I was lapped by a five-year-old. I was beginning to wonder if I'd made a wise decision.

But I kept along the trail, led by my friend, Matt, and our guide, Lok, until we sat for a water break in an open meadow a few hours later.

There we caught our first glimpse of the Himalayas, massive heaps of white snow and rock reaching up beyond the clouds. I guess the mountains we had been seeing up until this point were just minor hills.

Our trek, the Helambu route, is actually one of the easiest treks Nepal has to offer. Many treks involve weeks of intense hiking at altitudes that scarcely dip below the tip of Longs Peak.

Ours was mainly a nice, peaceful stroll through the Katmandu Valley with some pretty views along the way. Or so the trekking company told us.

For many hard-core trekkers, and definitely for the locals, the trek really is a walk in the park. But for a novice like me, it would be one of the most difficult challenges of my life.

In Colorado, many trails spiral around the mountains. We like to meander. We like our switchbacks.

In Nepal, trails go straight up. Then they go straight down. Repeat this process for five days straight, and there you have the basis of your trekking experience.

But it's the little things along the way that make it all worthwhile.

### On the trail

We departed from the town of Sundarjal, 13 kilometers north of Kathmandu, at about 9 a.m., Nov. 22. It was late in the trekking season and we were the last group our guide Lok would lead until the real winter cold set in.

Clad in fleece and long-sleeved shirts, we found ourselves to be the only Westerners along the trails. Yet we paid the price for this solitude by feeling the piercing eyes of the locals staring us up and down every time our paths would cross.

The sunglasses, the sunscreen, the backpacks and expensive hiking boots — how strange we must have appeared to them as they hiked along going about their daily business.

"I don't understand why you people pay money to walk in the mountains," Lok said. "But I'm glad to show you the way."

Our way lead through countless tiny Nepali villages, which are more accurately described as clusters of houses, as we observed the natives hard at work trying to farm and cultivate crops on the side of a mountain.

Yaks let out familiar "moo" sounds, goats darted across our path, fascinated children followed us — some asking for money, some selling "sweets" or orange Fanta soda, and some just smiling while saying "Namaste," which is Nepali for hello and good-bye.

After a lunch of three orange Fantas and a small tomato pizza (you must specify tomato or you get cheese and bread), we came across a group of children seated outside a small roofed structure on the top of a ridge.

"School," Lok informed us. "Please, come in," the teacher called out upon seeing us.

He gave us a tour of the classroom. It contained nothing but a chalkboard and one window. We noticed that the children are taught English as soon as they learn to read.

And, of course, we were asked for a donation for the school — which we obliged.

After about five hours on the trail, we came upon our guest house and collapsed into bed. There was no electricity and the showers were cold, but the food was hot and the locals were incredibly nice (as are most Nepalis).

After working all day, cooking dinner and cleaning the dishes, the employees of this guest house still had energy for a dance party, which they started up with nothing but a drum, clapping hands, and a song floating out from behind smiling lips.

To have so little and be so happy was a lesson all Americans should learn, I thought while gazing upon the pure innocent joy radiating from their faces through a simple song and dance.

Then we joined in the dance, showing off the "moon walk," "the worm" and other hits from the '80s much to the delight of the shy natives. After much pleading, they finally got in the groove and attempted to break-dance.

### Peaking out

We reached our highest point of the trek the next day, as we passed through waterfalls within a protected national jungle forest and then came out into a staggering view of the world's tallest peaks.

"Eight of the 10 tallest mountains are in Nepal," Lok informed us while pointing out the 10th highest, Annapurna I, which we saw off in the distance to the west.

To the east was Mount Everest, which was out of sight, but directly in front of us sat Langtang — the glorious peak that had been guiding us along this whole time.

If this had been any other continent besides Asia, Langtang would be the tallest mountain, topping out at 23,750 feet. But this being the Himalayas, it barely stood out in the unbroken row of staggering roof-huggers stretching across the entire horizon.

After resting a day and hanging out with locals in the village of Kutumsang, we began to make our descent on day



Nepal's Annapurna range boasts some of the world's tallest peaks, at times viewed behind local houses.



Dramatic views along the trail often call for dramatic poses, displayed here by the author.



The Nepalis show that they, too, know how to strut their stuff.

four, passing through amazing ridged farmland and splashing our faces in the pristine rivers we passed along the way.

After seeing the sights in the town of Talamarang on day five, where we posed in front of the police station that had been bombed by Maoist rebels the week before, we were ready for the bus ride back to Kathmandu.

As soon as we eased into our rigid wooden bus seats, the driver hit the gas and we were off, heads slamming against the ceiling as the old army vehicle rolled over mounds of Earth that made hitting speed bumps feel like driving over a pebble in the road.

After setting what must have been a world record for bus occupancy, people began climbing on the roof, chickens and goats piled into the seats around us (which were completely obscured by masses of humanity,) and then more people climbed on.

Tearing down the narrow dirt road, the bus beeped about every 30 seconds as people, cows, dogs and rickshaws rushed to the side in what must be a daily effort to avoid being trampled.

It may not have been the air-conditioned luxury ride we were hoping for, but after a rough but authentic jaunt through the physical and cultural Nepali landscape, the ride of the native Nepali seemed a fitting end to our adventure.

We were almost sad to see it end.

Almost.

## World's Tallest Peaks

1) Mount Everest	Nepal	29,035 feet
2) K2	Pakistan/China	28,250 feet
3) Kangchenjunga	Nepal/Sikkim	28,169 feet
4) Lhotse	Nepal	27,920 feet
5) Makalu	Nepal	27,765 feet
6) Cho Oyu	Nepal	26,906 feet
7) Dhaulagiri	Nepal	26,794 feet
8) Manaslu	Nepal	26,758 feet
9) Nanga Parbat	Pakistan	26,658 feet
10) Annapurna	Nepal	26,545 feet

Source: www.peakware.com



Temples are no unusual site on the hike, as Lok finds out.

## RMNP offers full moon walk, Lyceum series films

### Walk under moonlight; learn about railroads, bats and Sequoias

On Wednesday, Feb. 7, National Park Ranger LaShelle Lyman will be leading a Full Moon Walk.

Come and explore the park under the light of the full moon and learn about Earth's nearest neighbor.

The walk will be from 6 to 8 p.m. and will start from the Fall River Visitor Center. Dress for the weather that day! Reservations are required; make yours by calling (970) 586-1223 up to one week in

advance.

Reservations may be made between 9 a.m. and 4p.m. daily.

For further information on this program or general information on Rocky Mountain National Park, contact the Park's information office between 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., seven days a week, at (970) 586-1206.

As part of this year's Lyceum Series, Rocky Mountain National Park will include a variety of outstanding films about wildlife, wilderness, and more.

These free, hour-long programs begin at 7 p.m. in RMNP's Beaver Meadows/Park Headquarters Visitor Center auditorium on Highway 36, two miles west of the town of

Estes Park.

February's films include: **February 3 — THE SECRET WORLD OF BATS**

Originally shown on CBS television, this film is a must for naturalists, educators, and anyone interested in learning the fascinating truth about bats.

World-renowned cinematographer Dieter Plage follows Bat Conservation International founder Merlin Tuttle across five continents, capturing all aspects of bat behavior with stunning slow motion photography.

You'll see bats courting, rearing their young, and hunting prey.

You'll witness the symbiosis between bats and desert cacti, tropical rain forest trees, and

the African baobab "tree of life." And you'll meet bat conservationists the world over, from Thai monks to Australia's "bat mums."

If you're unfamiliar with the vital ecological roles of bats, this documentary will introduce you to an exciting field of discovery and scientific progress.

Those already familiar will enjoy seeing the wonders of Chiroptera in one of the most highly awarded nature films ever made.

**February 10 — SEQUOIA AND KINGS CANYON NATIONAL PARKS**

In all the world, the Sequoia giants grow only in a narrow band along the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada.

This is home to one of the

largest living things on Earth; trees that live thousands of years and depend upon fire for their survival.

Discover the cathedral-like forests, towering peaks and wildlife of these two magnificent national parks with this all-new production.

**February 17 — COLORADO'S NARROW GAUGE RAILROADS**

Hear the old steam engines chug and whistles blow as you ride some of the world's most spectacular railroads and learn of narrow gauge railroading's colorful past.

Experience trips aboard four famous narrow gauge lines: Durango & Silverton, Cumbres & Toltec, Cripple Creek & Victor, and Georgetown Loop. Also see "steam-ups" at the Col-

orado Train Museum.

**February 24 — WHERE AMERICA BEGAN:** Jamestown, Colonial Williamsburg & Yorktown

Visit these historic sites and experience life in Colonial America 250 years ago: militia musters, fifes and drums, skilled craftsmen, authentic buildings and much more.

In addition, you will explore the dramatic events that occurred here, reliving some of the most important chapters in American history.

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