•MANASLU AND TSUM •

NEPALI SHANGRI-LA

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This page and opposite page: View of Johannesburg's skyline from Braamfontein.

IT'S ICY COLD UP AT 4,900 METRES. I'M SHIVERING IN MY DOWN JACKET AND IT SEEMINGLY TAKES HOURS TO MAKE ANY PROGRESS FORWARD IN THE RARIFIED HIGH-ALTITUDE AIR, AS I PLOD ONE FOOT AT A TIME SEVERAL INCHES FORWARD BEFORE HAVING TO STOP TO GASP FOR BREATH. I CAN SEE HANGING RIBBONS OF PRAYER FLAGS JUST UP AHEAD, WHICH MARK THE LARKYA LA, A 5,100-METRE PASS THAT IS THE APEX OF THE INCREDIBLE MANASLU CIRCUIT TREK, A TWO-PLUS WEEK CIRCUMNAVIGATION AROUND THE WORLD'S EIGHTH HIGHEST PEAK, 8,153-METRE MANASLU. EXHAUSTION AND DEHYDRATION PROVIDE FAR MORE INTIMACY THAN MY FELLOW TREKKING PARTY MEMBERS, WHO ARE AHEAD OF ME, UNDOUBTEDLY CELEBRATING ARRIVAL AT THE TOP WITH A HUG, EXTRA LAYER OF CLOTHING, AND PERHAPS A SNICKERS BAR, BUT I'M IN GOOD SPIRITS, AS I LOOK AROUND AND GAWK AT THE SNOWY BEHEMOTHS THAT SURROUND ME, MAKING ME FEEL MORE HUMBLE AND INSIGNIFICANT THAN I'D EVER IMAGINED.

While trekking to Mount Everest Base Camp and journeying around the Annapurnas have long been mainstays of the Nepali tourist trade, Manaslu, and a side trip to the enchanting Tsum Valley, is well off the trodden path and gives newcomers the chance to experience Himalayan trekking as it was in its golden age. The region first opened to trekking in the 1990s, but the lack of teahouses and trekking lodges around much of the route meant that only well-equipped parties carrying tents and enough food for several weeks could tackle the arduous circuit. These days, scores of new lodges have been built, and there is accommodation and food within three to six hours' walk every day, so independent trekkers can now make the journey armed with nothing more than warm clothing and an aptitude for adventure.

The route initially follows the Budhi Gandaki River for almost a week, which rages, froths, and foams down in the subtropical lowlands, as the circuit begins at 900 metres, amidst lush rice fields and hospitable Gurung ethnic settlements. When we began our walk here almost a fortnight ago, the going was tougher than expected, as the trail paralleling the river wound up and down over steep valleys, often climbing high above the river where sheer cliffs blocked any level access. Our legs, not yet used to the rigours of walking distance every day, felt like putty at the end of the afternoon, and sweat saturation from the surprising heat and humidity made for a tired group of hikers come each evening.

Lodges, or 'teahouses', as they are traditionally called here, are basic yet welcoming. At lower elevations they are built of wood (and are made of stone higher up), and feature side by side small rooms with two beds, big enough for you, your travel partner, and several packs. Rooms aren't heated, but there are large blankets, and thicker yak wool ones as you move up in altitude. Dining rooms are communal and usually heated at night, and offer standard trekking menus which have prices set by village associations. While the Everest region is known for its bakeries and menus featuring apple pie or other western delights, the Manaslu area is still traditional Nepal, with dal bhaat (lentil curry, vegetables, and rice) being the main staple, or else boiled and fried potatoes, fried rice, and momos (steamed dumplings) as the mainstays for lunch and dinner. Breakfasts are a bit more international, offering pancakes, eggs, muesli, or a variety of porridges, either packaged oats or as one gets higher, tsampa, the Tibetan food staple, made from barley and mixed with flour. In the Tibetan areas, trekkers can sample thukpa, a hand-pulled noodle stew, and find cups of salt tea, mixed with local yak butter.

This page: Top: Nelson Mandela Bridge links Braamfontein to the inner city. **Bottom:** Maboneng Precinct. **Opposite page:** Dokter and Misses shop front and interior, Braamfontein.

About four days into the trek (which normally takes at least 11-12 days to safely acclimatise and circuit Manaslu), hikers have the option of turning off into the Tsum Valley, well worth a three to six day extra detour. The Tsum is a steep and remote valley that leads up to the Tibetan-Chinese border, with paths here still used as yak and trading routes over the high passes. The Tsum has only been open to outsiders since 2008, and offers a glimpse into a traditional mountain world, where Tsumba Tibetans eke out livings growing barley, amaranth, and millet on impossibly precipitous slopes above the wild Siyar River, which carves its way through the narrow gorge that marks the entry into the lower Tsum.

The Tsumbas are pastoralists, and their religion forbids them from hunting, which has led to the Tsum being a haven for some of Nepal's last remaining wildlife. Himalayan tahr (a type of wild goat) and bharal blue sheep dot the hillsides here and are regularly spotted, while up in the higher regions, elusive snow leopards can be seen.

During the massive earthquake which struck Nepal in 2015, the Tsum was sealed off for weeks, as the trails in here cut right across boulder-strewn unstable slopes, which our party experienced first-hand, as a minor landslide on the day we ascended to the village of Chumling forced us to wait an extra day while a trail-building crew went out and constructed some stone steps that allowed us to pick our way across the rubble.

Further above Chumling, the trail along the Siyar River levels and then crosses a fertile plain, with blazing golden and maroon fields full of amaranth and millet, ready for the fall harvest. I stop here to take some photos, and am surprised when a couple of young men out in the fields come over and speak English with me. Lobsang and Norbu both gained their language skills while going to school and working part-time in Kathmandu, and like most of the young men, see brighter lights and economic futures far from this valley.

Several things may be changing this outlook though. One is the arrival of tourism to the Tsum. With word getting out that the Manaslu-Tsum circuit is a far more genuine alpine Nepal experience than the over-trodden nearby Annapurnas, there is hope that running trekking lodges, portering and guiding, and other tourist services gives the young folk of the Tsum a better livelihood. Norbu tells me he misses the abundance of things to do in Kathmandu: clubs, cafes, dances, and his enlarged social circle there, but at the same time says that life here in the Tsum is stress-free, offering clean air and plenty of peace and quiet.

The other economic valve of the Tsum is yarsagumba. Scientifically called Cordyceps sinensis, yarsagumba (in Tibetan) is a caterpillar fungus that inhabits a ghost moth larva. Also known as Himalayan Viagra, it is claimed to increase energy and vitality, strengthen lung and kidneys, treat cancer and asthma, cure impotence, and boost libido. Yarsagumba is found only in Nepal and China at altitudes of over 3,000 metres, and fetches $20,000 per kilogram on the Chinese markets, making it the most expensive natural medicine in the world. It came to prominence during the Beijing Olympics, when famed Chinese running coach Ma Junren claimed that his star female runners were using it as part of their training regimen (which produced several world records), and demand for the medicine soared. Here in the Tsum, the fungus is dug up during the monsoon season, when there is little other work to be done.

This page (from top): L8 Café and Panini Bar at 44 Stanley; Candice Wyatt at home in her 44 Stanley, Milpark, apartment. **Opposite page (clockwise from top right):** 44 Stanley development in Milpark; Cycology at 44 Stanley; Anatomy Design at 44 Stanley.

At the head of the Tsum sits Mu Gompa, a monastery built in 1916 and tucked into the side of a ridge up at 4,000 metres. Above here several passes head into Tibet, but with access restricted to foreigners, Mu is as far as one can come. The views down valley here are superlative, with Himalayan giants Himchuli and Gauri Shankar looming high up over the forests and valley folds.

Half a dozen monks still inhabit Mu Gompa, spending their days meditating, chanting, and blowing traditional conch horns before conducting puja blessing ceremonies. They also rent out rooms to the few intrepid trekkers making their way up here, to what feels like the end of the world. From up above the monastery's slate roof, I look down at this paradisiacal valley and know it isn't just the lack of oxygen in the air that is making me giddy.

Revered Tibetan saint Milarepa is said to have meditated in the Tsum. According to Tibetan beliefs, there are supposed to be hidden sacred valleys that are only accessible to those who have the tenacity and courage to make pilgrimage to them. Known as beyuls, they are considered highly spiritual and conferring blessing on those who make it to their pastures. Ancient Tibetan texts say that the Tsum was one of these beyuls and was called Kyimolung, which means the "hidden valley of happiness".

Back down the Tsum Valley, we rejoin the trail climbing up to the Larkya La. The lush landscape begins to be replaced by dry pine forests, and shortly after this, by rock and ice. This is the high Buddhist alpine world, where ancient stone chortens and mani walls with Sanskrit mantras engraved into stones mark the entrance to each village. Samagaon, at 3,600 metres, is the largest of the villages here, and as it is a staging point for alpinists coming to climb Manaslu, it has some of the best lodges of the entire trek. It is also the place where almost all trekking parties take a day off to acclimatise for the final push over the high pass, as well as to make the day hike up to Manaslu Basecamp, which at 4,600 metres is one of the most stunning high-altitude day hikes one can make in the Himalayas that doesn't require any mountaineering equipment or experience.

This page (clockwise from left): Dokter and Misses shop front and interior, Braamfontein; AntiEst in Braamfontein; Dokter and Misses shop front and interior. **Opposite page (clockwise from top):** Outside Hotel Lamunu in Braamfontein; AntiEst in Braamfontein; Juta Street in Braamfontein.

This page (clockwise from left): Loincloth & Ashes in Maboneng; Arts on Main development in Maboneng; Kim Sacks Gallery in Parkwood.

Bir Bahadur Lama, trekking guide and owner of the Manaslu Hotel, Samagaon's oldest and most comfortable lodge, provides us with plenty of climbing tales and stories about Manaslu, seen from Samagaon more clearly than anywhere else on the circuit, over endless cups of hot milk tea. He tells us that locals believe Manaslu is inhabited by spirits and that if climbing parties don't conduct blessing ceremonies prior to embarking on ascents, then there will be dire consequences.

Manaslu was not successfully ascended until 1956 (and after this not again until 1971), and prior to this there were several major accidents caused by massive avalanches that swept Japanese climbing teams to their deaths. Following the biggest one, which destroyed the Pungyen Monastery in the valley below, villagers forced subsequent parties to make large donations to rebuild a new gompa, and also required that they do puja ceremonies to honour the gods before setting out.

We are not out to climb Manaslu, but the 1,000-metre ascent up to basecamp is challenging enough. The route goes up a lateral moraine ridge which culminates at the edge of the Manaslu Glacier, where huge ice seracs and crevasses make for a frozen labyrinth that those wishing to climb the mountain must navigate. This is as far as regular trekkers can make it in a day, and the views from here are sublime, with Manaslu's entire east face tantalisingly close, and across the valley, the Kutang Himal on the Tibet border, with the turquoise Birendra Tal Lake glistening far down below.

From Samagaon, the trail continues to rise, and past Samdo, the next village some three hours up the valley, all signs of human habitation disappear. It is a stark and barren world of large boulders, freezing weather, even in summer, and walls of ice looming up above everything. The only settlement here is Dharmsala, the last place of refuge before the pass. There are no trekking lodges here, nor is Dharmsala an inhabited village, but as it is too far from Samdo to cross the pass in a day, there is a makeshift tent camp set up at 4,500 metres, with passable tents equipped with mattresses lined up in rows, as well as an elongated dining hut to feed the masses. Sleep doesn't come easy here, as it is cold and high, and most trekkers set out to cross the Larkya La at 3 or 4 in the morning, to avoid the winds that plague the pass and increase as the sun rises.

After some three to four hours of putting one foot after another, I can see the finish line ahead. The thousands of bright prayer flags contrast with the bright snowy peaks and intense blue sky, fluttering in the wind and welcoming me to this alpine abode. I know I still have to descend, but this will come in time. I see my friends up ahead, and weep tears of happiness, exhausted and overjoyed to be in this remote place, truly a throne room of the mountain gods.

This page (clockwise from left): Loincloth & Ashes in Maboneng: Arts on Main development in Maboneng; Kim Sacks Gallery in Parkwood.

FACT

WHEN TO GO

The best seasons for trekking around Manaslu are spring and autumn, with the peak months being March-April and October-November. The fall months see the most clear days with beautiful mountain views, while the spring months feature rhododendrons in bloom throughout the forests. The spring season can extend into May, but the monsoon arrives by June, rendering trails muddy, leech-infested, and often impassable, with the monsoon often lasting throughout September. Trekking in December and also into January-February is possible, but you'll need to be prepared for freezing temperatures. As winter sets in, high passes can also become perilous, with the need for crampons or ice axes and more than just regular hiking gear necessary to navigate them.

WHERE TO STAY

Simple 'teahouse' lodges are the norm throughout the Manaslu-Tsum trek. The best lodge along the way is found in the busy village of Samagaon, where trekkers normally take a day off for acclimatisation. Bir Bahadur Lama's Manaslu Hotel (T. +977-993644005) is the top choice, followed by the also long-running Norbu Lodge. In the Tsum Valley, the New Milarepa Lodge in Chhokhang Paro (T. +977 974-1502341) is a comfortable choice, with an English-speaking proprietor. In Kathmandu, treat yourself to some pampering after a hard trek by staying at Dwarika's, a heritage hotel made from intricately carved old wooden pieces from artistic Newari buildings. It's Kathmandu's most boutique and unique sleep. Visit *www.dwarikas.com/home*

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

To enter Nepal, your passport must be valid for at least six months from the date of entry. Visas on arrival are issued to all nationalities either for 15, 30, or 90 days, costing USD$25, $40, and $100 respectively.

TREK REQUIREMENTS

A permit for both Manaslu and Tsum is necessary, costing $70 per week for Manaslu, plus $10 per extra day, and $35 for an eight-day Tsum Valley permit. An additional $40 is needed for Manaslu Conservation and Annapurna Conservation area park fees. The Manaslu Circuit takes a minimum of 11 days and going up the Tsum Valley will add another five to six days in total.

A guide or porter-guide is required for all parties, costing around $20-25 per day. Permits are only given to parties of two or more, but individual trekkers can often get paired with other trekkers by trekking agencies in Kathmandu, and it is also possible to buy two permits and trek alone. A list of excellent trekking agencies is provided on the Manaslu Circuit website listed in Further Information below.

EATING AND DRINKING

While Kathmandu boasts a selection of cuisines from around the world, out on the trail you'll be much more limited. The traditional Nepali meal, eaten several times a day, is dal bhaat, lentil curry, served with some curried vegetables, leafy greens, and a fermented pickle known as achar. It's the best eating option on the trail, because it covers all your carbohydrate and protein requirements, and also because you get free refills of everything, meaning you can fill yourself up at a bargain price. Other menu items in the teahouse lodges include fried and boiled potatoes with vegetables and yak cheese, fried rice dishes, stuffed dumplings called momos, and you'll even find the occasional plate of spaghetti or burrito attempt using local ingredients in a few of the snazzier spots. Breakfasts feature muesli, porridge, pancakes, eggs, and fried Tibetan bread. Higher up in the Tibetan regions, you'll find thukpa, thantuk, and other thick homemade Tibetan noodle stews on the menu.

Varieties of tea are served all along the trail, with sweetened milk tea being the most popular. You can also sample traditional Tibetan tea, made with salt and churned yak butter. It might not sound appealing, but it is actually quite good, thick and creamy, and is often served with tsampa, roast barley flour that is the staple of the Tibetan diet.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The Manaslu Circuit Trek website is a great source of information for trek preparation and pre-trip planning: http://manaslucircuittrek.com

SIX THINGS NOT TO BE MISSED

1. The incredible views and other-worldly feeling from Mu Gompa in the Tsum Valley.
2. Doing a day trip to Manaslu Basecamp, offering views normally only attainable by professional climbers.
3. Watching Tibetan agricultural communities up close, especially during the autumn harvest season.
4. Crossing the Larkya La, which at 5,100 metres is as high as most folks will get in their lives.
5. Trying to spot bharal sheep, Himalayan tahr, or if you're really lucky, a snow leopard in the upper Tsum.
6. Crossing the longest suspension bridge in Nepal, one of many hanging bridges to be found along the route.