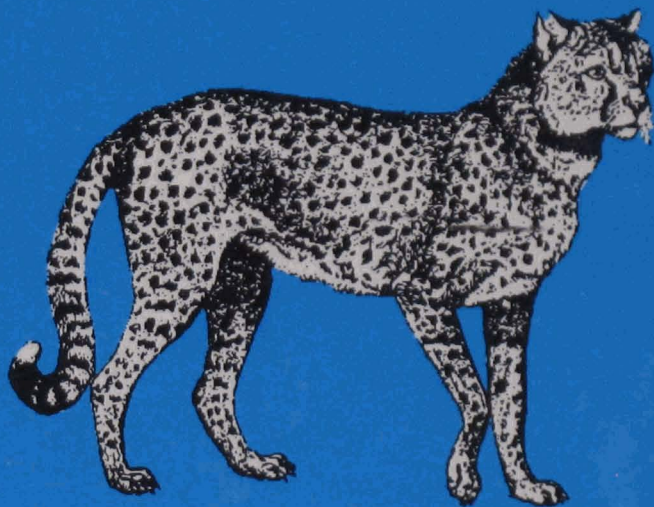


TREKKING
in the
HIDDEN LAND
of
DOLPA - TARAP
and
SHEY - PHOKSUNDO



by
PAOLO GONDONI

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Editor's Note:

In this 2nd edition I have included approximate altitudes each day to give you a clearer idea of what lies ahead. You are strongly recommended to allow more time for acclimatisation, particularly between the Seng Khola and Jangla La (day 8), and between Regi - Ringmo - Poyon Khola - Dho / Tarap (days 12 - 14).

Also, if you are not arranging your trek through a trekking agency, you must make sure you are absolutely totally self-sufficient in everything you might need - assume nothing is available in Dolpo.

So, take extra time, extra food, extra fuel, extra care and enjoy this extraordinary trek!



KANJIROBA HIMAL

DOLPO AREA MAP

Shey Gompa

to Jamla

Phoksundo Lake

RINGMO
3600

Bagn La
5090

Numa La
5360

DHO / TARAP
4100

KAGMARA LEKH

Pungmo

Regi
3050

Poyon Khola

Sepka

ROHA
2970

Lahini
3250

Thulo Beri

Suli Gad

Heuta Char

Juphal

DUNAI
2150

KHANIGAON
2500

Tarap Khola

TARAKOT
2550

Barbung Khola

Jangla La

DHAULAGIRI HIMAL

Gompa

Map drawn by
Bob Gibbons



INTRODUCTION

In May 1989, the Nepali government lifted the ban on foreigners visiting the Dolpo area.

It's a long and difficult trek that leads you from Pokhara to remote places like Phoksundo and Tarap; through high passes, deep jungles and high mountain ridges.

It takes about one month to go from Pokhara to Ringmo and Dho / Tarap and return by the same route on foot, but this can be shortened by flying. It is possible to fly from Jumla or Juphal to Nepalganj in the Terai, and from there to reach Pokhara or Kathmandu by bus or flight, but domestic flights in Nepal are subject to weather conditions. These days, however, with several new airlines and increased helicopter services, you are unlikely to be delayed for many days.

Trekking in Dolpo is possible only during May to mid-October.

PLANNING YOUR TREK

You should always check the current situation at the Immigration office or your Nepalese Embassy, but, at the time of writing, it is possible to get a trekking permit for Dolpo at

the Immigration Office. It's a little more expensive than a normal trekking permit (US\$ 10 a week plus Rs. 650 for the entry fee for the Shey - Phoksundo National Park). You should also take some money for emergencies. One porter for one person is not enough. You will need two porters if you are alone, but two porters are also enough for two people. In Kathmandu you should buy food and everything else you think you'll need for the whole trek. Take a tent, ice-axe and 30 - 40 metres of rope. The rope may be necessary if you need to cross rivers where there are no bridges, or to cross difficult places on your trail.

DAY 1 KATHMANDU - BAGLUNG - BENI (823m)

It is now possible to fly from Kathmandu to Pokhara and take a bus direct to Baglung the same day. Baglung lies on a big rock cliff about 200m above the river and is the capital of this district.

From Baglung, follow the track to Parse. This takes about 1.5 hours. At Parse you'll see the long bridge across the Kali Gandaki. After about 1.5 hours you'll reach Beni with its long bazaar along the main street, hotels and police checkpoint. Sleep here. There are some hotels at the end of the village.

DAY 2 BENI - DARBANG (1115m)

Beni is the last village with shops where almost everything is available. Darbang, which you'll reach this evening, has very few things available. From Beni follow the river Myagdi Khola, which starts from the Dhaulagiri Glaciers. After 2 hours of pleasant walk by the river, you'll reach Tatopani with its hot springs. These springs are about 200m after the village on the riverside.

There are 3 springs bubbling from the sands of the river side. Take lunch at the small hotel in this village. After this point up to Darbang you'll find only small tea shops by the roadside. It is not a long way from Tatopani to Darbang, but because of a big landslide between Ratadunga and Darbang, you must climb very high up the cliff on your right, then descend for about 400m into Darbang. From Tatopani, due to this landslide, it takes about 6 hours to reach Darbang, where you will find in the middle of the village the only hotel available, run by a Thakali family. It has good food and a pleasant atmosphere. This is one of the few places where you can see a Gobar gas plant. Ask the hotel owner to show it to you. It's in the garden of the hotel, and is a very primitive system used to get gas for cooking and illumination from animal dung (a Chinese project). The owner was complaining to me, because after having paid Rp 25,000 he still has to buy wood for cooking, as there is a

loss of gas due to the bad quality of tubes. But he is very proud of this plant which is the only one in the area. For him it acts as a status symbol. The Thakali are famous all over Nepal for their ability in running small hotels. Originally they come from the Thak Khola in the Jomsom area. The owner of the hotel in Darbang is a Hindu, but they are mostly Buddhist. However, in their hotels you can easily find good *sukuti* (dried meat) and *chhang*.

DAY 3 DARBANG - MARAINI (2600m)

From Darbang you must reach Maraini on the same day. It's a long day! At Darbang cross the bridge on the Myagdi Khola (Magdi). On your left side, on the other bank of the river, you can see the effect of an enormous landslide. In October 1988 at midnight, due to heavy rains, the mountain dominating the village on the other side slid down, killing 110 people. Also the river was blocked for 6 hours and the bridge was 3 - 4 metres under water. People who lived near the bridge tried to escape by climbing to the upper part of the village but many died in their beds.

Ten minutes after the bridge you start a small climb up a rocky path dug into the cliff just over the river. ***Be careful!*** It lasts about 15 minutes. The place is very dangerous, especially in rainfall because of rockfall and the slippery rocks on the path.

In case of bad weather wait a little. Many people have fallen into the river at this point. Then follow the path near the river and after 1 hour you'll reach Phedi, which is just three or four houses at the bottom of the steep ascent that will bring you to Dharapani. Many places in Nepal are called Phedi which means "at the bottom of". From Phedi, with a steep ascent of 2.5 hours, you'll reach the village of Dharapani (fountain of water) with its fields and houses spread all over a large valley facing the Dhaulagiri Himal. In good weather conditions you can see all the Dhaulagiri Massif with its 6 peaks, the Putha Hiunchuli and the Churen Himal. The path is flat through the villages of Takum and Sibang. After Sibang start the climb to the small village of Mattim. After reaching a crest go down to Mura. All these villages are inhabited by people of mixed caste but you'll see many *Kami* (blacksmith, an untouchable caste). You can recognize them from their black faces, dirty clothes and hands. In these villages they find jobs as porters or do seasonal work in the fields.

Of course they also work as smiths, their natural job; making *Khukuri* (Nepali knife), kitchen utensils and all iron handicrafts. Sometimes far from the villages beside the road, you can see big holes in the ground full of black ash. Here they make iron, far from the villages, as iron, fire and smoke are considered to be close relatives of the Devil. From Muna after 1 hour you descend to the small bridge crossing the Dhara

Khola. From the bridge start to climb for 1 hour up to a hut. Then descend to a small river, cross a bridge and start to climb again. Be careful! The path which leads to the Caphe Glacier, the base camp of Churen Himal, starts here. You must take the path that goes down to the village of Jomsong. It takes about 2 hours from the bridge on the Dhara Khola to Jomsong (also known as Lumsum). From Jomsong after 15 minutes you enter a small beautiful valley and in the middle of the jungle you reach a small group of houses called Nayaban. From Nayaban cross the river by a small bridge and start the steep climb of about 45 minutes to the only house of Maraini. This small house is a hotel which is run by a nice Hindu Thapa family. From here you will need to use your tent almost every day. The house is very small and, if somebody arrives before you, there is no place to sleep inside but you can still have your dinner in the kitchen with the family.

DAY 4 MARAINI - DHORPATAN (2300m)

From Maraini (2600 m), it will take you about 4 hours to reach the Jalja La (3430m). Start early if you want to reach Dhorpatan in the same day. It takes 4 hours to reach Gurjaghat from the top of the Jalja La and a further 2.5 hours from Gurjaghat to Chentung, the first village of Dhorpatan Valley. Leave Maraini and start to climb through a beautiful forest. People from this village will advise you not to go alone, but

wait for some other caravan of porters along this route to Dhorpatan. Fear of wild animals such as tigers, leopards, bears and also dacoits (bandits), is big among these villagers. Nobody here walks alone and there are very few huts from Maraini to Gurjaghat. Here starts the Royal Dhorpatan Hunting reserve. Leeches are really a problem in this jungle. In Maraini ask the hotel owner for some Timbur against leeches. Timbur is a sort of wild seed, which has a smell that leeches don't like. Your porter will show you how to use it. From the pass start the gentle descent to Gurjaghat through an incredible forest of pine trees, junipers, flowers and small hills. Several times you will have to cross the upper course of the Uttar Ganga and its small tributaries on slippery bridges made of a single tree. In Dhorpatan a few hours below, you'll see the Uttar Ganga as wide and turbulent as the Modi Khola near Kusma. Here you are in the kingdom of the tiger, leopard, black Himalayan bear and deer. It's a long way from Jalja La to Chentung, but the path is so quiet and fascinating that you arrive in the plain of Gurjaghat without realizing it. Take lunch here; there are 2 or 3 small huts where you can find food.

Now the path becomes flat through the forest and after about 2.5 hours you reach Chentung, the first village of the Dhorpatan Valley. There are 2 hotels in Chentung. Sleep here. In Dhorpatan itself are no hotels, only private houses where it is possible to find food and lodging, but in uncomfortable

conditions. From the hotels in Chentung you can buy some food like rice, dried meat and sometimes biscuits. Plan your provisions carefully from here to Dunai. It is 6 days of hard walking and you will not find any kind of food.

DAY 5 DHORPATAN - PAGUNE LEKH HIGH

PASTURES (3600m)

From Dhorpatan (2300 m) starts the long and sometimes difficult ascent to the Pagune Lekh. This takes 6 to 7 hours. After passing the police checkpoint in Dhorpatan, walk for about half an hour on the same side. Do not take any path climbing to the north until you have reached a small group of houses. Then take the path on your right side and start to climb. At the beginning it is gentle, but after half an hour the climb becomes steep and you reach some *ghor* (shepherds' huts) in a small valley with green pastures.

Cross the valley and climb again. This climb from a valley to an upper small valley will take 4 or 5 hours until you reach the banks of the Pagune Khola. From here start a steep ascent following the river between rocks and canyons, up to the summit of the Pagune Lekh (4050m). From this pass, which is marked with a small chorten (pile of stones adorned with prayer flags), you will have a beautiful view of Dhaulagiri, Churen and Putha Hiunchuli. Start the descent, but stay on the

path up near the high pastures. Do not descend to the valley. After about 2.5 hours you'll find a small hut where you can camp at 3600m. You can ask for *dahi* (yoghurt) and *dudh* (milk) here.

DAY 6 PAGUNE LEKH HIGH PASTURES -

YAMAKHAR (2550m)

Start the descent to the Ghustung Khola. It takes about 1 hour of descent to a grassy meadow where there are some abandoned huts. Cross the small river that passes through the meadow and enter a fantastic jungle. It takes about 2 hours to cross this jungle. Finally you arrive at a bridge which crosses the river at 2800m. Rest a little before starting the steep ascent up to 3250m. This takes 2 hours. Then the path follows the crests of many small peaks, with a beautiful view of the Ghustung Khola, until you reach a small chorten. This marks the beginning of the descent to the village of Pelma, just near the Pelma Khola, which takes 1.5 hours. It is difficult to get food in this village.

Cross the bridge over the Pelma Khola and climb up to the small village of Yamakhar (2550m). There are no people in this village. Villagers come here only during the day to cultivate their fields of potatoes, corn or wheat. In the evening they return to their houses in Pelma on the other side of the valley.

They are mostly Magars and speak little Nepali. Camp on the roof of one of the houses. From here, it takes 3 days to go to Dhorpatan, following the Pelma Khola and the Uttar Ganga. It's an easy route to Dhorpatan but takes one day more than the normal route across the Pagune Lekh.

DAY 7 YAMAKHAR - SENG KHOLA (3600m)

From Yamakhar start to climb to Dhule. The grassy path zig-zags up to a solitary hut on the left after about 1.5 hours of climbing. After the hut, turn to the right. Cross the stream down in a small valley and climb again. After 30 minutes you'll find a small bridge that crosses another river coming from your left. Cross it and climb again. The path now goes through dense forest leading to a narrow gorge and an unnamed river. Here you may think you have lost your way. In the following difficult and slippery passage you must literally climb this river for about half an hour, jumping from one rock to another. Then the path becomes normal and at the top of this narrow valley you will find Dhule (3300m). It takes about 5 hours from Yamakhar to Dhule; a group of about five wooden huts, inhabited by Magars. Stop here for lunch.

Here the path divides in two. Follow the one on your right. Climb up to a small passage and then the path becomes flat for about 1 hour. Then start the long ascent of about 2.5 hours to

the Nautale La (3970m), which is marked with a chorten. From here start the descent to the bed of the Seng Khola. The path follows the right side of the river, where are many caves, and where it is also possible to put up a tent.

DAY 8 SENG KHOLA - JANGLA LA (4530m)

From the camp at the Seng Khola (3600 m), start the climb to the Jangla La. On the left side of the path, it is easy to see a steep path leading up. Climb it and after about 2 hours reach a pass (4300m) marked with a chorten and a small lake. From here the path is flat and clearly visible. Then it starts to climb a little to another pass of 4470m with no markings. Do not hurry, it's not the Jangla La! You must descend for 1.5 hours to the Saunre Khola and then climb again before reaching the Jangla La (4530m) marked with stones. It's really a long matter to cross the Jangla La; long but not so difficult. Camp in the grassy meadow before the pass or cross the pass. Or, after about 2 hours of descent, you'll find a campsite with water in the forest surrounding Tarakot. In this forest Matthiessen, the writer of The Snow Leopard, is said to have seen the Yeti.

DAY 9 JANGLA LA - HEUTA GHAR (2300m)

From the top of Jangla La starts the old Kingdom of Tichurong, the "Valley of Fragrant Water". Before the

Gorkhas arrived with the harsh laws of their kingdom, Tichurong was an independent kingdom whose capital was Tarakot or Taragaon or Dzong "The Castle", as the local people call this village. The Dzong is no more, but a beautiful gompa lies near the river bank on the right side dominating all the Barbung Khola valley from a nose-shaped grassy slope at the junction of the Tarap Khola from the north, and the Barbung Khola from the east. After 3.5 hours you reach the first houses of Tarakot (2800m) with fields cultivated with corn, potatoes and Chinese rice. Descending for more than half an hour, near the river bank is the checkpost at 2550m. Cross it, walk for 15 minutes on the left side of the river. Then cross the bridge and follow the path towards Dunai on the right bank of the Barbung Khola.

After 3 hours of pleasant flat walk is a lovely house at the confluence of the Barbung Khola with the Rishi Khola, known as the Heuta Ghar (one house). Camp under the willow in front of the house. Don't sleep inside the house. There are too many insects.

DAY 10 HEUTA GHAR - ROHA (2970m)

From Heuta Ghar follow the river and after 2 hours reach the bridge crossing the Barbung Khola and the first houses of Dunai. From the bridge, Dunai, with its government office,

army, hotels and shops, is 45 minutes distant. Take lunch at Dunai (2150m). From here to Ringmo there are no hotels. You must cook your own food. Dunai is the administrative capital and has the only market in all the Dolpa district. After the police checkpost, cross the river by the old wooden bridge, the same scattered bridge that Snellgrove saw more than 30 years ago. Two roads go to Roha (2970m) from Dunai.

Follow the Barbung Khola to the confluence of the Suli Gad and then follow the Suli Gad for 1 hour on the river bank, which leads to a steep climb of 5 hours to Roha.

The other path starts 5 minutes after crossing the Dunai bridge. Immediately it starts to climb to the north-west on a grassy slope. You save time travelling this way. After 3 hours you can see on the mountain in front of you a group of abandoned houses. This village is the winter village of the people living in the high part of the valley. Some people from Ringmo even have a second house here, fields and sometimes a second family. After 2 hours reach the beautiful Roha, a village of flat-roofed houses, with a small gompa above it. The gompa is dedicated to the God *Masta*, a divinity of this valley. There is no water in the village. Fill your bottle at the river half an hour before reaching Roha. Ask for permission to put your tent up on a house roof.

People here are of mixed race. Mostly they wear and speak Tibetan. Some Nepali, probably Magar and Chetri, and a few *Burathoki* with big Afghan-style turbans live here. They are shepherds and businessmen leading long caravans of goats loaded with small bags of mineral salt from the Tibetan border to the rich pastures of Pagune Lekh and Dhorpatan. From here they sell their goats all over Nepal. Many of the women wear necklaces adorned with long musk deer teeth. People call the musk deer *kasturi*, it has two long teeth like the primitive tigers. From their glands comes musk essence. For the first time, in Roha, you will see hanging from the walls or spread on the roofs of houses to dry in the sun, the *ciuk*, a red plant with lotus-shaped leaves when fresh. *Ciuk* is a plant that grows only in lower Dolpo and is one of the biggest sources of income for the people of this valley. They take it down to the pharmaceutical factories of India, and it is used in the preparation of several medicines.

DAY 11 ROHA - REGI (3050m)

Leave Roha and follow the flat path high above the Suli Gad river for 1.5 hours. Arrive at the military post of Hanke (2660m). After about 1 hour from Hanke the trail follows the river bank. Near the fantastic deep blue waters of the Suli Gad is a single Tibetan house in the middle of cultivated fields and apple trees. If somebody is there, it is possible to get food. This

place is called Sepka. The path follows the river bank for 1.5 hours until it reaches the narrow gorge of the Suli Gad. From here it starts to climb the rocky canyon, with some difficult passages on slippery rocks, 100 metres above the Suli Gad. It is better to use a rope. Then again it descends to the Suli Gad with some difficult passages near the river bank. About 4 - 5 hours after Sepka, you'll see on the opposite bank a few Tibetan houses surrounded by beautiful fields of yellow *tori* (mustard), *jau* (barley) and *ganja* (cannabis) from which they extract cooking oil. This is Regi (3050m), a small village belonging to a single Gurung family.

Twenty-five years ago 7 brothers from Ringmo, belonging to the ethnic minority of non-Tibetan people of this village, decided to emigrate because of bad relations with their neighbours. Descending the Suli Gad valley, they stopped in this place, built their houses and cultivated their fields. A small bridge crosses the river and a nice path leads up for 10 minutes to this pleasant and beautiful place. Across the fields, a small white river drops in a big waterfall from the Kagmara Lekh rocky gorges.

DAY 12 REGI - RINGMO / PHOKSUNDO LAKE

(3600m)

The mountains start to become red and yellow with less vegetation and only small contorted junipers. After 1 hour, at the confluence of the blue Suli Gad with a muddy river coming from the northwest, is a military post just after crossing the bridge. After the checkpoint stay on the right side of the Suli Gad, walk through a forest and meadows of flowers and edelweiss, and start to climb to Ringmo. Here the mountains are arid. Strong dry winds blow from the north-east, from the Baga La pass, excavating the red sandy mountains. After 1 hour you will reach a group of strange houses, half-buried with windows at ground level. This, Mondro (or Murwa), is one of the winter villages of the people of Ringmo. There are snowfalls from November to March, but much less than the 2 - 3 metres of snowfall in Ringmo. Not everybody leaves Ringmo in winter. The two old lamas and some of the oldest villagers live for 4 - 5 months buried in their smoky, dark houses; eating, drinking, praying and meditating. *Naur* (blue sleep) and *sarkain* (the snow leopard) are the masters of the situation in winter. The Phoksundo lake does not freeze in winter but the Suli Gad does.

From the winter village, climb for 2 hours and you will start to hear the rumble of the spectacular waterfall of Ringmo.

Climbing on to a small rock, you'll see it. A 330m high waterfall drains the lake, which is 650m deep, spreading large rainbows. From a panoramic point above the waterfall appear the deep blue waters of the Phoksundo Lake, surrounded by high red and yellow mountains and the great glacier of Kanjiroba. The first part of the Suli Gad starts from the lake and, crossing the meadow and alpine forest of Ringmo, brings its blue waters to the waterfall. Ringmo village (3600m) is about 1 km from the lakeside. The path passes through many old chortens and *kanis*. The biggest, near the village, has a painted ceiling. Some parts of these paintings are old but still in good condition and with brilliant colours. Most of the inhabitants of Ringmo are Tibetans. There are also some Magars who speak and dress Tibetan, having lived here for generations. Houses are of the Tibetan flat-roofed style and are big with 2 or 3 storeys. It is possible to buy some food here; such as potatoes, *tsampa*, flour of *papar* (buckwheat), *chhang* and *rakshi*. It is better to camp on the other side of the river, by the lakeside, near a small house belonging to the Scout of this area. You are not allowed to burn firewood in this place. This area is the Shey-Phoksundo National Park. Scouts will kindly give you permission to cook food in their house.

A path crossing behind the Scout house, which is small for 15 minutes, will lead you through a beautiful pine forest and small

chortens to the Ringmo Gompa which has two *Bon Po* lamas. *Bon*, the pre-Buddhist ancestral religion of all the Tibetan area (based on shamanism and on the cult of *Shen Rap*, also identified with Buddha Sakyamuni in the normal iconography), is still strongly present within these mountains. Here people walk anti-clockwise around chortens, performing the ritual *cora*. Ringmo Gompa, with Samling Gompa in the north and Tarap Gompa in the east, are the most important places of the *Bon* religion in all this area. These two lamas are married and have families. In their dark and dusky private chapels are the statues of Guru Rinpoche and Sakyamuni. Often their big *jankro* (ritual drums) rumble between the rocky walls of the lake.

It is not possible to see the end of the lake from the Ringmo side, because it divides into two, going north and east. About 5 km long and 1 km wide, the circumambulation of the lake is not possible. There is only a trail on the west side leading in 2 days to Shey Gompa, but the trail is a "Restricted area," and so is Shey Gompa itself. This trail has impressed all who have walked on it. It starts from the west side of the lake a few metres higher than water level, but after a few hundred metres it starts to climb the steep rocky cliff at an altitude of about 70 - 80 metres. This is an incredible narrow path partially carved into the rock. Where it was not possible to dig into the rock,

birch poles have been hammered into the rockwall. A thrilling experience! After 1 hour the trail descends to the lakeside near a large stone beach crossed by a river descending with a big icefall from the Kanjiroba Himal. Again the difficult trail starts to climb higher and higher and finally descends into the north branch of the lake. From here, after the Sebu La (5500m) pass, Shey Gompa (4600m) is reached.

DAY 13 RINGMO / PHOKSUNDO LAKE -

POYON KHOLA (4450m)

From Phoksundo Lake it is possible, in 2 days, with good weather conditions, to cross 2 high passes east of the lake, to reach the Tarap valley. It's not a very difficult path if the weather is good but it becomes a problem with rain or snowfall. It's better to have a local guide to cross these passes and you must be totally independent with food, tent and fuel. The path is not easy to find, and a mistake can be very dangerous in these mountains. During mid-August, one heavy snowfall forced us to stop for some hours before the first pass, the Baga La (5090m). The path starts from the Ringmo bridge, going eastwards at the beginning through a dense forest, when still you are in the Ringmo valley. After you reach the top of the valley, with a complete view of the huge waterfall, pass high above the village of Mondro / Murwa and then descend slowly to the grass pastures of Roman, where there are two

shepherds' houses. This is the last human settlement for the next 2 days. From here the path starts to climb, and after 2 hours you must choose between 2 paths. One, that looks like the right one, is in front of you, leading south-east. But it has no outlet. It only leads to high pastures on the top of the valley.

The correct path to take is on your left side, marked by a big waterfall. Going northeast, you immediately climb into a narrow valley that becomes wider and wider up to the Baga La, a pass surrounded by big glaciers and blade-shaped rock cliffs. It takes about 7 to 8 hours to reach the pass from the village of Ringmo. From the pass there is a beautiful view of all the Kanjiroba massif to the west. Cross the pass marked with stones and start the descent to the Poyon Khola (4450m). This river crossing is possible only in the morning. There are no bridges. This river, descending from the slopes of the Poyon Lekh's glacier, becomes 2 or 3 times its normal size during nighttime. Camp some metres above water level. This place is between the 2 passes going to Tarap, the Baga La (5090m) and the Numa La (5360m). From here it's easy to see, on the surrounding slopes, groups of grazing *naur*, the blue Himalayan sheep, jumping from one rock to another with incredible agility.

DAY 14 POYON KHOLA - DHO / TARAP (4100m)

Two hours from the Poyon Khola, the flat path meets a well-marked trail going northwards, and leading in a few hours to Shey Gompa (3600m). Here again, choosing the right path is difficult. Half an hour after the junction of the Shey Gompa trail, 2 valleys are in front of you. One goes southeast, but ends at the top of the valley on high pastures. Take the path going northeast and climb for 4 hours in the middle of these desert mountains up to the top of the Numa La (5360m). From the top of the pass, marked with mani stones and covered with 40 cm of snow (in mid August), opens a beautiful view of the Tibetan mountains and the upper Tarap Valley. North and eastward is the Kungung Lekh. Far to the north, at the top of the Tarap Valley, is the Khyung La (4750m), leading, in less than one day, to Shey Gompa. From here starts the long descent to the Tarap Valley. In 2.5 hours from the pass you reach the Tarap Khola. It is still a small stream at the beginning of its course.

Walk through grassy meadows with plenty of flowers and wild rabbits jumping from hole to hole. Walk on the right side of the Tarap Khola and after 3 hours from the pass you will reach Champa Gompa, a beautiful big gompa with an impressive statue of Guru Rinpoche. From Mondro, the last village on this left side of the valley, cross the river on a small wooden bridge.

Pass through the villages of Ciumaga and Kakar with its big red gompa, and after 2 hours you reach Tarap (4100m) (known by locals as Dho); the main village in this area. Camp near the river or on a flat-roofed house.

Big chortens are all around this village and in the middle of *papar* fields there are barley and potato fields. This upper part of the Tarap valley, about 20 km long, is flat, with about 10 villages with cultivated fields and many important gompas and chortens on both sides of the valley. It is inhabited by a few Tibetans, but mostly by Magars. Having lived here for generations, they speak Tibetan and wear Tibetan dresses. In spite of their closeness to the west part of Tibet, by a strange quirk of the human mentality, they speak and dress like *Khampas*; Tibetans from east Tibet, a place hundreds of miles from here. Their gompas are almost equally divided into *Choba* (orthodox Buddhist) and *Bon Po* (the ancient pre-Buddhist religion). In Dho, two gompas are the Guru Bumba (*Choba*) above the village, and Scipcha Gompa (*Bon*) 1 km east of the village, and they share between themselves the souls of the few villagers. In both gompas live important and rich lamas. During the frequent *tirtha* (festivals), people go to pay respect in both places. It takes a minimum of 2 days to visit the villages and gompas of this paradise valley, but it's worthwhile.

DAY 15 DHO / TARAP - TARAP KHOLA CAVE

(approx. 3500m)

From Dho, at least 2 days are necessary to reach Tarakot, the starting point of your way back. But from here also starts the most difficult and dangerous part of all the trek. After leaving Dho, for about 4 hours, the path follows the Tarap Khola with a gentle descent. Then at the first bridge crossing, the valley becomes narrow, and deep gorges, crossed by innumerable small bridges, make the river more and more impetuous. The path is dug into the rock but many parts are covered over by rockfalls. In some places the valley is not more than 15 metres wide. On both sides of the river there are many caves of all sizes; some small enough to give shelter to a few people only, while 2 are huge enough to contain a full orchestra. During rainfall it is too dangerous to walk on these slippery rocks. It is better to stop in one of these caves to wait for better conditions. We had to use a rope many times on this part to cross dangerous rock slides or uncertain bridges simply made of 1 or 2 trees; sometimes covered with mobile stones.

Camp in one of the biggest caves on the right bank of the river. After crossing one of the small bridges, about 2 hours later, you will meet another trail on the right side. It cuts the Dingla Churi and arrives in Laban and Bantaragaon on the Barbung

Khola 2 hours west of Tarakot, about half way between Tarakot and Dunai.

DAY 16 TARAP KHOLA CAVE - KHANIGAON (2500m)

This is the most dangerous and difficult day of all this trek. About 10 years ago, the construction of a new trail was started, partially following the old one. (Ed: According to Kev Reynolds' book, it seems that the trail was still under construction in 1995.) It's a fantastic piece of work, with parts completely dug in the bare rocks, and others on the river side, paved with big stones like old Roman consular roads. But the fury of waters, landslides and avalanches have destroyed parts of this work. It's a thrill to walk here, and we took no less than 5 hours to walk for not more than about 3 km. Finally you see, 250m below you, a beautiful meadow on the riverside with two big waterfalls coming from the big mountain behind. This is the single hut of Lahini (3250m). But to reach it you must descend through a canyon where the path been washed away. You'll need 30 - 40 metres of good rope and about 1 hour to cross this difficult passage. After Lahini the path is good, and after crossing the last bridge, the valley becomes wide. In this part it is easy to see the *kasturi* (musk deer), jumping in the middle of juniper and pine forest.

Down, where the valley becomes large and green, is the checkpoint. The Tarap Khola here receives the biggest of its tributaries, the Lascap Khola, a large milky river coming from the east, that makes the green waters of the Tarap Khola a muddy colour and doubles its size. Continue high on the path up to the village of Khanigaon (2500m), 2 hours from Lahini, and camp on one of the flat-roofed houses. This village is inhabited by Magars but in Tibetan dress. It has fields of *chinu chamal* (Chinese rice), potatoes and buckwheat and is also the winter residence of the people of Dho and other villages of the upper Tarap valley. Some of these people are *kasturi* poachers. Almost every woman in this village has a necklace of *kasturi*'s long sharp teeth.

DAY 17 KHANIGAON - TARAKOT (2550m)

Descend from Khanigaon to the bridge. Cross it, and after 3.5 hours you'll reach the checkpoint of Tarakot (2550m). From Tarakot it takes from 8 to 10 days to go back to Pokhara by the same route you came. Or go to Juphal, 4 hours west of Dunai, one day from Tarakot, and fly to Nepalganj, in the Terai. From there, fly or take a bus to Kathmandu.

RELIGION

Religions in Dolpo are in fact two: ***Choba*** (Buddhist) and ***Bon Po*** (Tibetan Shamanistic religion preceding Buddhism). Gompas of both religions are present all over this area, but there are more ***Choba*** gompas than ***Bon Po*** gompas. In the part that cartographers call Inner Dolpo, that means the Ringmo Shey-Phoksundo and Tarap area, are most of the ***Bon Po*** gompas. Ringmo, Pung Mo, Samling and Scipcha Gompa in Tarap are all big ***Bon Po*** gompas.

Shey, Namgung, Namdo in the north part of Dolpo, and Champa Kakar and Guru Gompa in the Tarap valley, are the biggest ***Choba*** gompas. Lamas of both religions are married and have families. Most of these gompas are rich. The monasteries own fields and animals. Villagers give support with voluntary labour and donations. Externally the difference between the two religions is that the ***Bon Po*** performs the ***Cora*** around chortens and stupas walking anticlockwise, while the ***Choba*** walk around clockwise. ***Bon Po*** believe in ***Shen Rap***, usually represented as Buddha Sakyamuni, and some Gods and Goddesses are in common with Buddhism.

To quote from David Snellgrove's book Himalayan Pilgrimage:
"The ***Bon Po*** claim to represent the old indigenous religion of

Tibet of the Pre-Buddhist days, but some of them have since adopted so much of Buddha's teaching and religious practice, that they might be considered a special sect of Tibetan Buddhism, albeit a very old one. They may well be adjudged the world's greatest plagiarists, for they have rewritten the whole Tibetan Cannon, the *Kanjur*, giving it the supposed *Bon Po* setting instead of a Buddhist one and attributing it to their founder teacher *Shen Rap*."

PEOPLE AND LANGUAGE

People in Dolpo are not yet used to foreigners and sometimes the atmosphere can become heavy. Only the big, ferocious unchained dogs often at the doors of the gompas, near the houses and free on the mountains guarding grazing animals, seem to notice your presence. People who may refuse to sell food, give hospitality and close doors in front of you, are common in these places. But also many people are naturally kind and helpful. To visit gompas is not easy, and to persuade Lamas or monks to open them is sometimes impossible. However, gompas are mostly open for functions in the late afternoon or very early morning, but in most of the gompas of the Tarap valley you are not allowed to enter during these functions or *tirtha* (festivals).

The most important languages spoken in Dolpo are Tibetan (Khampa), Magar and Kaiké. The mysterious Kaiké language is spoken only in 3 villages; Shahartara, Tarakot and Tupa. These villages are all on the left side of the Barbung Khola. The Kaiké language is said to have been donated to these villagers by an Angel who married a human in ancient times. James Fisher, an ethnologist, lived for one year in Shahartara studying these people and their language.

Magar is spoken in the south part of Inner Dolpo. In Khanigaon, Laban, Bantaragaon, Singricaon and partially in Roha and Dunai, people speak Magar. But there are also people from the castes of *Burathoki*, *Bahun*, *Rohani*, and Gurung who speak their own languages. In the north, at Ringmo, Pungmo, Dho / Tarap and in the upper Tarap valley, the population is a mixture of Tibetans and Magars, but all speaking the Tibetan of Kham. All these people have adopted the costumes and language of Kham, an immense territory east of Lhasa in Tibet.

WILDLIFE

Dolpo is the land of the mystic *sarkain* (the snow leopard) and *naur* (blue himalayan sheep). It's easy to see the *naur* in Dolpo and even earlier, in the Seng Khola, Saunre Khola area. But they mostly graze in the Phoksundo area, between Baga La and Numa La and all over the Dho / Tarap valley. *Naur* are of a brownish colour in summer, but in the winter snow they become a silvery white. People say that the *sarkain* follows the *naur*, but it remains a mysterious animal for most of the people. It's easy to see *kasturi* (musk deer) on the path between Roha and Resi, before Ringmo and between Lahini and Kanigaon, south of Dho / Tarap. The *kasturi* live in the alpine forests while the *naur* live on rocky cliffs with poor vegetation. Descending the Tarap Khola, the *kasturi*'s presence starts when the valley becomes green. At first it is only grassy and then becomes a deep forest, ending in the wild, bare territory of *naur* and *sarkain*. Also the Black Himalayan Bear and the Jungle Leopard live in the forest of the southern Tarap Khola, and in all the Dhorpatan area.

It's possible to encounter snakes on the trail, not normally above 3300m, but the Himalayan Viper has been found at 3700m in the Ringmo area. Snakes near high mountains are mostly not poisonous or only slightly poisonous, but in the

lower parts many are poisonous. A poison-sucker syringe, antihistamine tablets and cream are a good precaution. It can also be useful to consult a local *jankri* or *dhami* who will know how to cure snake bites using herbs.

FOOD AND DRINK

Water in Dolpo is mostly pure. In Phoksundo Lake's blue waters there is no life and this is also the case with the Suli Gad. From here up to the middle Tarap Khola the waters are also said to be drinkable, but *it's always better to purify the water*. It is better to buy food at the beginning of the trek as it is difficult to find in the Dolpo area. Rice culture stops in Dunai; then starts the *jau* (barley), *papar* (buckwheat) and *tori* (mustard) cultures.

It's not very easy, but it is possible, to find *tsampa* (barley flour) to mix with salt Tibetan Tea and chapatis made of *papar* or *makai*. Much barley and *kodo* (millet) are used to produce home-made liquors such as *chhang* and *rakshi*, while cooking oil is produced using mustard and marijuana seeds. Up to about 3000m a kind of plant that locals call *chinu chamal* (Chinese rice) is cultivated. They eat this in the same traditional way as *dahl bhat*, but in fact it is a rice-like variety of millet.

CLIMATE

The monsoon finishes its last efforts on the crests of the Jangla La and in the valley of the Barbung Khola. In the northwest it reaches as far as the middle course of the Suli Gad. After that, the weather is dry and the vegetation becomes poor. This is the Transhimalaya. The climate here is very similar to that of the Tibetan Plateau. Snowfall ends in May and starts some time in October. High passes like the Baga La and Numa La are open for not more than 2 months in a year. The people of Ringmo start the descent with animals and food stocks to the winter villages, some 600m down, at the full moon of October, while the people of Dho / Tarap do it some days before.

Trekking in Dolpo is possible mainly during the months of May, June, July, August, September and October.

MAPS

Various maps of the Dolpo region are now available in Kathmandu.

Mandala Maps

Dolpa-Jumla to Jomsom

Jomosom to Jumla & Surkhet

Pokhara to Round Dhaulagiri Himal

(shows the route from Pokhara to Tarakot)

Nepa Maps

Dolpa (Paolo Gondoni)

Trekking Map

Dolpa Tarap & Shey Poksumdo

(Alessandra Lovatti & Paolo Gondoni)

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- TUCCI, Giuseppe:** *Nepal, all scoperta Del Regno
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- TUCCI, Giuseppe:** *Tra Guingle E Pagode*

Since this book was first published in 1989, a few more trekkers have trodden the trails of the Hidden Land in search of the mysterious snow leopard (sarkain). But it seems little has changed in terms of the route; the Tarap gorges are still wild and untamed and a new trail started 10 years ago has yet to be completed.

Access to Dolpo is long and difficult, but those determined trekkers who make the effort will be amply rewarded.

Towering waterfalls, narrow twisting gorges and ancient pre-Buddhist Bon Po monasteries combine to make this a truly unforgettable journey.



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REFERENCE