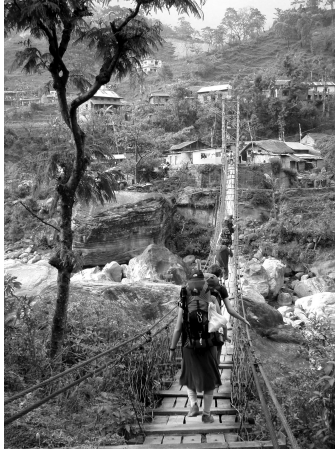


Dhaulgiri the Beautiful

In April 2008, I finally embarked on a journey which I had been planning for three years. To start my gap-year journey, I travelled with my friend Jason to Kathmandu in Nepal, intending to trek the Annapurna Circuit, a 300km trek circumnavigating one of the most famous massifs in the Himalayas.



trying to keep costs down and on the basis that we had done the Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award carrying heavier packs. When asked however, we naturally told people we just liked the challenge!

The scenery was magnificent from day one, but it was nothing like I expected.

Vertical Scenery

The first couple of days we walked in humid, dense jungle, the luscious, green fauna clinging to impossibly steep valleys, which disappeared into the clouds. Every evening the humidity that built up during the day would finally break into a thunderstorm high above, but usually we managed to avoid the rain. As we climbed from 2000m to 3000m above sea level the jungle changed to pine forest and the mountains began to remind me more of the Alps

After five days of trekking we arrived in Manang, a day ahead of schedule. We had now climbed to 3400m, 200m above the point at which trees stop growing, so the terrain was dusty and desert-like. We had enjoyed stunning views of the North side of the main Annapurna massif, as the peaks of Gangapurna, Annapurna III and Annapurna I (8091m) revealed themselves. Although stunning, I found it difficult to truly embrace the view, as at 4.5km vertically above us, they were on a scale difficult to comprehend.

The Nepalese people, in whose guesthouses we lodged, were very friendly and kind to us, although the

Out-facing the Eiger?

It had been a dream of mine to see the Himalayas ever since I had skied in Mürren, Switzerland. Wondering at the immensity of the North Face of the Eiger, it dawned on me that these mountains, large for the Alps, were a mere half the size of the mighty 8000m mountains of Asia. I promised myself that at some time in my life I would visit those mountains and see if they could outdo the awe-inspiring Eiger.

So after four days of trying to understand Kathmandu and coping with a tummy bug, Jason and I took the seven-hour bus to Besishahar, where we were accompanied on the first 10km of our trek by an American and a Canadian, Mary-Anne and Mona. We would spend the next three weeks with these two hardy ladies, who each had more trekking experience than Jason and I together. They had packed far lighter than us, each with backpacks weighing around 8kg, compared to ours at 16 to 17kg. We had planned to hire a porter for the entire trek but decided not to,

language barrier often meant that any conversation beyond a basic level was impossible. As we walked for an average of six hours a day, the opportunity to interact with the porters and guides was far greater and their English better.

Jason's Magic Trick

One porter, Surya, with whom I am still in contact, was amazed when Jason performed a magic trick, making Surya's coin levitate and float around in the thin air in front of him. That evening about 20 locals waited in the room while we ate,

just for a glimpse of the trick again. He finally obliged, performing it with his usual flair, sending the audience into a frenzy. After much interrogation I informed Surya that the secret was simply to spin the coin very fast, making it act like a helicopter blade, pushing air down and the coin up! The next day we did an acclimatisation hike, and climbed to 3800m and down again to get used to the lack of oxygen. When we set off Surya and his friends were repeatedly throwing and spinning coins in the air. When we returned four hours later they were in the same place, doing the same thing! I felt bad about it until recently when I received an email from Surya informing me that "Sometimes I practice your magic."

I think that he deserves to know the secret, but it is Jason's, so I'll have to ask him first!

We trekked for two days from Manang to Thorung Phedi, a tiny settlement which

serves as a base camp for Thorung La pass. At 5416m it is, I believe, the highest pass in the world that you can legally go over without a guide. It is much higher than Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in Europe. The ascent didn't seem too painful, but the descent was endless.

The Most Awesome Sight Ever

Before I knew it we stumbled upon the epic Muktinath Valley, probably the most awesome sight of my life. A combination of not expecting this view (you expect

them at the top, not the bottom) fatigue and the evening light made me feel truly moved by the sight. The Valley itself was full of Hindu and Buddhist temple complexes, with greenery and large trees almost

magically flourishing way above the tree line. This vast valley was flanked by huge ridges and the silhouette of a mountain pyramid looming over the whole scene. But the sight which topped this off was the white massifs leading up to the jutting pyramid of Dhaulgiri, piercing a layer of the upper cumulus cloud. This mountain, at 8162m, remains the highest mountain I have ever seen and although I never saw it from closer than 20km, the most beautiful.

If you are interested in trekking or travelling in Nepal, please ask me anything. I could put you in touch with Surya to carry your bags, as long as you break the news about the magic trick!

David Ridley, age 19

Email: david.ridley@hotmail.co.uk

