

Rolwaling Trek

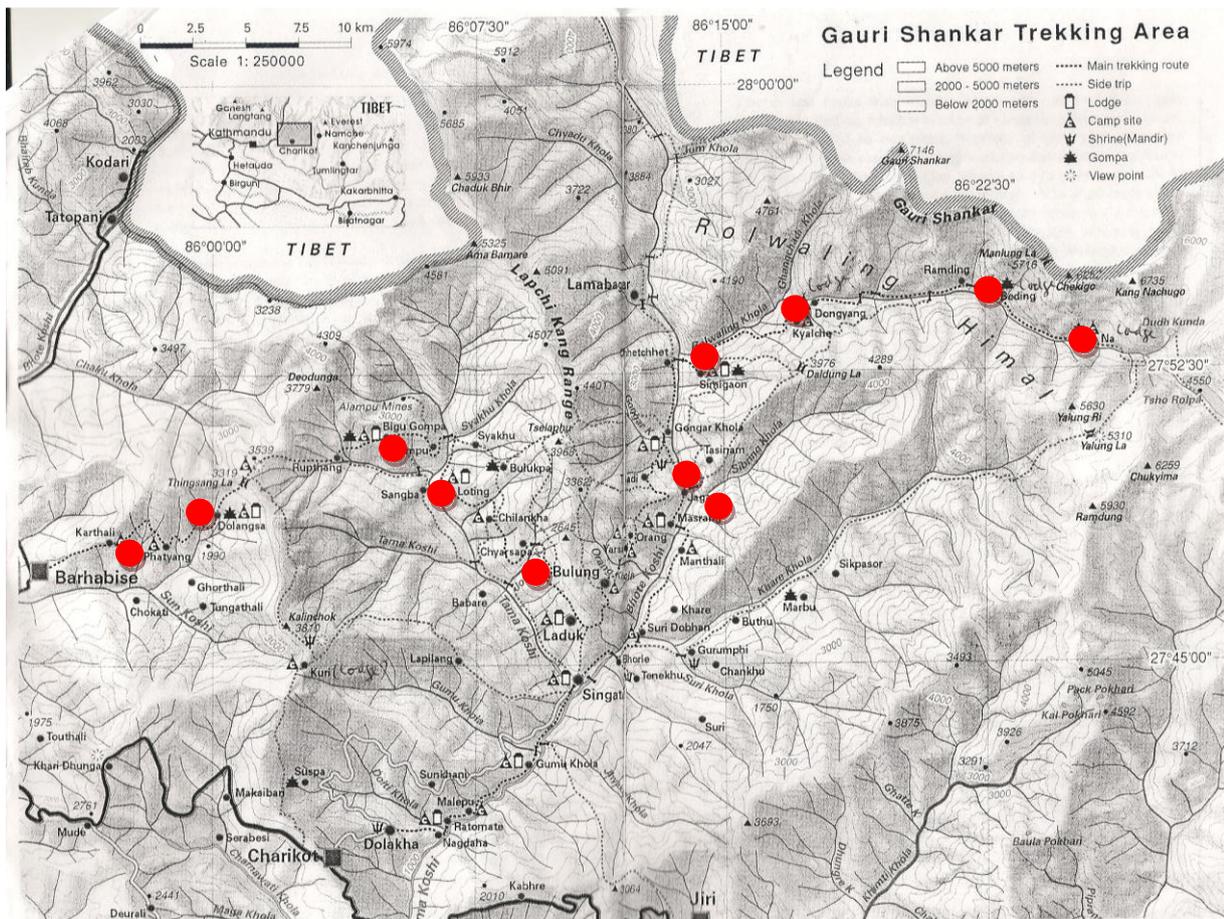
Date: October 10-25, 2012

Participants: Govinda Upadhyaya (guide), Min Bahadur Tamang (porter), Adriano Bosio, Birgit Frischhut



Itinerary:

- Day 1: Kathmandu - Jagat
- Day 2: Jagat - Simigaun
- Day 3: Simigaun - Kyalche
- Day 4: Kyalche - Beding
- Day 5: Beding - Na
- Day 6: Na - Tsho Rolpa - Na - Beding
- Day 7: Beding - Simigaun
- Day 8: rest in Simigaun
- Day 9: Simigaun - Gongar Khola - Thadi - Orang
- Day 10: Orang - Soisang
- Day 11: Soisang - Chilankha - Loting
- Day 12: Loting - Bigu
- Day 13: rest in Bigu
- Day 14: Bigu - Thingsang La - Dolangsa
- Day 15: Dolangsa - Karthali
- Day 16: Karthali - Bahrabise - Kathmandu



As many people that I have met during the trek and my stay in Kathmandu were interested in the experiences I would make in the region, I have prepared a short report about our trek in Rolwaling/Gaurishankar area. In case of any questions or feedback, please contact me at birgit.frischhut@mci.edu.

Access to the trekking area: We decided at the last minute to take a 4x4 car to get to the area and skip the first days of the classical trekking route. The way until Jagat takes roughly 6-7 hours and we paid 16,000 Rps for the drive. On the way back we took the public bus from Bhrabise to Kathmandu. As we travelled back on one of the last days of Dashain and the buses had not run the 3 days before, buses were packed and the trip took more than 5 hours instead of the expected 3-4. Nevertheless the access to the area is one of the big bonuses of the region, as your trip does not depend on uncertain national flights. Just one day after I arrived in Kathmandu a plane to Lukla crashed shortly after taking off in Kathmandu and all passengers were killed.



Accommodation: The availability of accommodation has developed mainly in the area up to Rolwaling valley, and in some villages nowadays you have the choice of several lodges as this is the case in Simigaun. While some lodges are clean and offer some kind of shower facilities, others are very badly maintained and basic hygienic standards are lacking. As some lodges have changed their initial function and they do not operate anymore, accommodation facilities from Bigu to Rolwaling (or on the opposite direction) are becoming a challenge for lodge trekkers.



Ecohimal lodges: Out of the 8 lodges that Ecohimal built during the project phase, 2 of them have changed their function and are no longer available for trekkers:

- The lodge in Gongar Khola has been taken over by the hydro power plant
- The lodge in Laduk has become the headoffice of NTNC National Trust for Nature Conservation for the Gaurishankar Conservation Area.

On the other hand, some lodges are only partly open to trekkers. The Loting lodge, for example, has rented out one room to the NTNC and a second one to the local development committee. While some lodges have been quite well maintained and are running well, others are lacking basic hygienic standards and facilities. Here are some more details for the 6 still existing lodges.



Simigaun:

The lodge in Simigaun does not seem to be very well maintained, the solar and hot water system is broken as well as some of the windows. Outside the lodge a lot of glass bottles are lying around. The lodge is still functioning, but as there are 2 alternatives just next by, our guide decided to stay in one of the other lodges that offer better facilities. We however met a trekker from Canada who has stayed there and was satisfied with the service he received there.



Orang:

The Ecohimal lodge in Orang together with the one in Loting were the ones presenting the worst hygienical status. Mattresses are okay as they are covered in black plastic. I personally think it was a very clever idea to cover them as it would be very easy to clean them. However it does not seem like the caretaker in Orang would ever do so. We actually did not meet the caretaker couple personally as they were gone to Singati and it was the 16 year old son taking care of us. There was no electricity, the hot showers were not working and rooms were not clean. The taps in the (cold) shower could not be closed, the water was running non-stop. However Orang lodge is by far the one with the best views.



Laduk:

The lodge is taken over by NTNC and we had to admit that it is by far the best maintained lodge. The wood has been painted, toilets are clean, rooms are well maintained and there are a lot of flowers around. It's a shame this lodge is not available for trekkers anymore.



Loting:

Loting was by far the worst lodge. The mattresses looked like they have never ever been cleaned, windows were broken and in the dining hall a lot of material and furniture was stored. One room has been taken by NTNC and another one by Chilangkha village development committee. However they offered us to stay in the rooms. There was no water at all (they said they were going to repair it though), not even to wash hands. Toilets were awful and I had to experience some bedbugs that night as well. Lights were working and there was a possibility to charge batteries.



Bigu:

While the lodge in Bigu is run quite well and the two lodge keepers Khadga Bahadur Magar and his wife are doing a good job and making trekkers very welcome, the lodge itself would need some renovations. The showers are working very well and during our stay there were even volunteers from the gompa and locals coming over for a hot shower. Those American volunteers usually came around for some beers in the late afternoon and the shop in general seemed to be running well. Solar lights are working, there are plugs to charge batteries and they are still using the fan-oven for making tea. There is also mobile connection nowadays, even though the network was sometimes very busy due to Dashain and it was hard to get through. Most of the villagers have electricity nowadays.



Dolangsa:

The lodge has been run by Kami Sherpa and Pema Renjen Sherpa, two brothers-in-law, since the Ecohimal project phased out. The lodge was rather clean and the hot showers were working. However the water was running non-stop and it was not possible to stop it flowing. At the same time there was a sign that asked people to save water :). There is light and some mobile connection, but no possibility to charge batteries. It is an ideal place to watch the sunset.



Karthali:

Even though it took some time to find someone to open up the lodge, we had a good stay in Karthali. The lodge was taken over by a new couple this year. It was difficult to understand why the old caretaker, Sunil Rokka, stopped running the Ecohimal lodge. It seemed like there was some change in the CDC who wanted Rokka to stop. The new couple was quite nice, even though a bit drunk once they arrived (for their excuse: it was Dashain). Their daughter took care of us in the evening preparing one of the best Dal Bhaat we had in two weeks. The shower and toilets were still there, even though the hot water was not working. The toilets were one of the cleanest even providing toilet paper. Only one room had light. Also Karthali offers nice sunset views.



Food:

Even though we knew we would mainly be eating Dal Bhaat, it was getting hard after some time. The kitchen garden program of Ecohimal did not seem to have a long lasting effect as the only alternative to Dal Bhaat twice a day was sometimes Rara noodle soup and in Beding and Na plain potatoes. For breakfast we had Chapati and omlet for the whole 15 days. Even though there seem to be other food items available, people do not show any creativity in preparing it.



Prices:

Prices for rooms and food vary - mainly depending on altitude. While the room charge was 250 Rps. in Jagat, it was up to 400 in Kyalche and Na and 500 in Beding, Orang and Bigu. A Dal Bhaat cost 170 Rps. in Jagat and Bigu, but 300 in Kyalche and Beding and 350 in Na. A cup of tea ranged from 10 Rps. in Loting and Dolangsa to 30 in Kyalche, Beding and Na. In some places there was a price difference in room rates between trekkers (150 Rps. per room) and guide & porter (100 Rps. per room). Often guide and trekker were also not charged for food. Most expensive was beer for around 350 Rps. per bottle. In Bigu we were charged extra for the hot shower (50 Rps.). In general prices are quite low and many lodge caretakers claimed they have not raised prices since taking over the lodges in 2008. With a current inflation rate of around 20% a price increase could easily be argued. However in some places quality would have to rise as well.

Tourist numbers in the region:

We were quite surprised about the number of trekkers in the region. Especially up and down the Rolwaling site we met several groups per day sometimes. Those ranged from small groups (2 trekkers, guide and porter like us), to individual trekkers without guide or porter and classical camp trekking groups with around 10 trekkers and 20 guides and porters. Trekkers were mainly from Europe or North America, we only met one Japanese group in Na.

The official statistic from NTNC which started counting purchased trekking permits presented 141 trekkers from September to December 2010, 1.006 in 2011 and 556 in January to April 2012.



Trekking route:

Many trekkers nowadays come to the region by private car and leave out the first part of the original trekking route from Charikot via Dolakha and Singati to Jagat. Some trekking groups even go as far as Chhyotchyot and just start trekking from there. Even though streets have been developed between Charikot and Chhyotchyot, the street development does not really harm the original trekking routes. The only place where trekkers have to walk on the street starts before Jagat and goes up to Gongar Khola and Chhyotchyot.

Most of the organised camp treks that we met had the aim to cross Tashi Lapcha pass and come down on the other side into the Everest region. Only few groups did a peak up on the pass, but returned back the same way they came in. We met only few people on the way up from Gongar Khola via Orang and Loting to Bigu and down to Bahrabise.

While the first part is quite nice to walk and offers nice views (like at the lodge in Orang and views back on Gauri Shankar), the walk from Bigu over Thingsang La and down to Bahrabise has been badly damaged by the street development. Trekkers cross the street (or what is left of it after the landslides) frequently and that way becomes less and less attractive. Maybe it would be an alternative to take the route from Thingsang La to Sano Jyandar, Kyamarle Kharka and the last resort as proposed by the Great Himalaya Trail (www.greathimalayatrail.com). However this is only possible for groups camping as there are no lodges on the way.

We originally planned to go up to Kalinchok, but as there is no more accommodation on Thingsang La and I already had troubles with my knees walking down, we decided not to. Besides the original trekking route proposed by Ecohimal, Baikuntha Pradhan from Dolakha Tourism Development Board has proposed alternative trekking routes for various periods of them. Many of them focus on the area around Kalinchok starting from Charikot. For more information have a look at: <http://dolakhatourism.blogspot.ch/> Another route is proposed by the SNV "version" of the Great Himalaya Trail from Jiri via Laduk and Bigu to Bahrabise: <http://thegreathimalayatrail.org/trek/ght-rolwaling-section-lower-trail/>

Road construction:

While the road construction is nowadays going all the way from Charikot via Singati, Gongar Khola, Chhyotchyot and Lamabagar to the Tibetan border, it offers the trekkers to go into the area and "save" a few days of trekking. This is especially true for the ones who want to cross Tashi Lapcha pass. While the street up to Chhyotchyot is built down at the river and does not seem to do as much harm, the further part up to the Tibetan border cuts the hillside and has caused many landslides. The road therefore damaged the landscape and also does not seem to be safe at all. The road from Karthali over Thingsang La to Bigu has been totally damaged and can hardly even be used for motorbikes anymore. This part has the most severe effect on the trekking trail as the walk up to Bigu or down to Bahrabise has become less attractive.



People's perception of tourism & Ecohimal:

All people that we met were very positive about tourism and they would like to see more tourists coming into the area. However many people - especially those ones close to a road or to the power plant - claim that tourism is not the first development option anymore. People often prioritize the road to tourism. Only a few people who have experiences less tourists due to the road construction have a slightly different view on that. Only the people of Beding and Na do not favour further road construction up to their settlements. They are afraid this would harm their income source from tourism. Anyone we spoke to was very positive about the Ecohimal project and the main outcome for most of them was the rise in hygienic standards by the building of toilets and tap water. This has actually become a standard nowadays and every house has a toilet and access to clean water. People are however quite confused about the Gaurishankar Conservation

Area which is led by NTNC (National Trust for Nature Conservation). Most people are not sure which benefits and cut backs they will face by it.



Other organizations promoting the area:

There are various people and organizations that work for or in the area:

Gaurishankar Association - a Basque NGO that has been working mainly in the Rolwaling valley building bridges and trying to repair small hydro power plants together with the people of Beding (<http://gaurishankar.e-monsite.com/>)

Dolakha Tourism Development Board - while this seems like a state-funded Tourism Board, it is a Committee of private people under the lead of Baikuntha Pradhan. They have developed various leaflets of the area and have a blog (www.dolakhatourism.blogspot.com). They have identified the touristic, cultural and natural sights of the area and have developed various alternative trekking routes. When we talked to the DDC responsables about the tourism development, they sold those brochures and leaflets as theirs.

Robin Boustead - has been trekking the Great Himalaya Trail several times and has published a photo book, guide book and various maps www.greathimalayatrail.com

SNV Dutch Development Agency - runs a development project on the Great Himalaya Trail, but the Rolwaling section has not been selected for development, they only do some PR www.greathimalayatrail.org

Next steps:

In order to better inform potential trekkers about the lodge facilities in the area, I will try to collect as much information as possible in order to put it on the Ecohimal website. I made the experience that many trekkers do not know about the current state of infrastructure in the area. Even though there is quite some material around nowadays (mainly thanks to Robin!), it is hard for tourists to find any information on the web. I hope to fill that gap with a separate site on the Ecohimal website and might get back to a few of you for information and your personal feedback.

Cheers, Birgit