Trekking the salt trail

In the Nepalese Himalaya, a time-honoured trade route still favours the bold. Daniel Allen reports.

Photographs by Daniel Allen
As clouds of spray drift across the valley from the roaring Suligad Waterfall way below, a yak caravan picks its way along the narrow cliffside trail, past ornate Tibetan characters carved into the rock face and over rough stone steps, limbo-like tree roots and assorted fallen boulders. Multicoloured decorations sewn into each ear, the head yak leads the way, its precious cargo of grain rolling from side to side. Despite the 1,000-metre drop, progress is steady - this is a journey that these hardy beasts have made countless times before.

In the heart of the remote Nepalese region of Dolpa, villagers have depended on such high-altitude trails for decades. With the mighty Dhaulagiri massif to the south and Tibet to the north, this is a land of mountain ranges, monasteries and medieval fortresses. Dominated by soaring peaks of austere beauty, settlements here are among the highest on Earth. The extreme topography makes this one of the most remote areas of the Himalaya - it's little wonder that Dolpa is also known as Bu Yal, or ‘Hidden Valley’, in Nepalese.

TIMELESS QUALITY
Encircled by ramparts of rock and ice, and isolated behind snow-choked passes for much of the year, Dolpa is most easily reached via the Chinese autonomous region of Tibet. The ancestors of many Dolpapa (residents of Dolpa) once emigrated from the north, and Upper Dolpa - the area closest to the border - is an outpost of authentic Tibetan culture. ‘There's a timeless quality, an otherworldliness, about Dolpa,’ says Jamie McGuinness, a tour guide with Nepalese trekking outfit Project Himalaya. ‘The Dolpapa’s way of life has changed little over the centuries. Once above the tree line, there’s also that ‘big sky’ feeling. The scenery is all about shades of light, colours, eroded textures. This is a region of captivating culture and landscapes.’

Although Buddhism predominates in Dolpa, the Bon religion of Tibet, which pre-dates Buddhism, is still practised on such high-altitude trails for decades. With the mighty Dhaulagiri massif to the south and Tibet to the north, this is a land of mountain ranges, monasteries and medieval fortresses. Dominated by soaring peaks of austere beauty, settlements here are among the highest on Earth. The extreme topography makes this one of the most remote areas of the Himalaya - it's little wonder that Dolpa is also known as Bu Yal, or ‘Hidden Valley’, in Nepalese.

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END OF THE CARAVAN
Today, the transport of salt between Tibet and Dolpa has all but ended. ‘The high incidence of goitre in remote Himalayan villages led to the regular supply of state-subsidised iodised salt in Dolpa in 2000,’ says Shahi. ‘This is the main reason for the decline of the salt trail.’

But the disappearance of the salt trade has brought trade and travellers of a very different nature to Dolpa’s well-worn trails. ‘The salt trade was the only way that these people could survive. Today, overseas trekkers and their retinues of porters and guides are an increasingly common sight.’

One of the major reasons behind the appearance of trekkers on the trails of Dolpa, and those of neighbouring areas, is the Great Himalaya Trail (GHT). It was officially opened at the turn of the year but has been marketed for far longer.
and its advent has seen bridges and trails repaired throughout the district.

‘The GHT in Nepal is more than just a path through a few select villages,’ explains author and die-hard Himalayan explorer Robin Boustead. ‘It’s a network spanning thousands of kilometres and linking hundreds of villages. The idea is to encourage trekkers to visit previously remote areas of the country, thereby helping poor communities, such as those in Dolpa, benefit from tourism on their own terms. Villages can sell produce or handicrafts, provide guides and porters, and offer accommodation.’

DEVELOPING TOURISM

To coincide with the promotion of the GHT, efforts have been made to enhance the Dolpa trekking experience. A tourism-training project has been underway in the district since 2008. ‘The overall objective is to improve services,’ explains Ravindra Shahi. ‘We’re teaching the Dolpapa a range of skills, including conversational English, cooking and hotel management.’ Shantaram Bishwakarma, a Dolpapa from the village of Juphal, lives in a simple two-storey mud-brick building with his wife and two children. ‘This year, I’ve studied hard to improve my English. If I wasn’t guiding, I would almost certainly be farming, which is far tougher and brings in a lot less money.’

‘Dolpa may be beautiful, but it’s a tough place to eke out a living,’ adds Dechen Tsomo, a young but frail teacher at the nearby Dolpa Bon School in Dunai. ‘Lack of water is a problem and many families can’t grow enough to feed themselves. We hope the extra work and money that tourism brings will change people’s lives here, especially those of the children.’

Dolpa trekkers often find themselves sharing trails with the Dolpapa and their animals. ‘There are no roads in Dolpa, so

TRAIL FOCUS

The network of paths once followed by salt caravans now forms the basis of new Great Himalaya Trail (GHT) trekking routes in Lower and Upper Dolpa. With no road access to the district, trekkers must fly in to the rudimentary airstrip at Juphal (2,350 metres). Following the Suligad River up to the beautiful Phoksundo Lake, they then cross several 5,000-metre-plus passes en route to Saldang (4,200 meters), a trade hub close to the Chinese border.

From Darchula and Humla in the west to Kanchenjunga in the east, the GHT in Nepal spans the entire length of the country (it takes 157 days to complete the full traverse). The eventual aim is to connect Pakistan, China, India, Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar via a 4,500-kilometre, serpentine route across the Great Himalaya Range.

‘In Nepal, each of the GHT’s ten sections has its own character and level of difficulty,’ explains Linda Bezemer, a tourism product development advisor with the Great Himalaya Trail Development Programme. ‘Lush green valleys, high arid plateaus, towering peaks, diverse flora and fauna, ancient and colourful cultures – they all combine to give trekkers a unique and memorable experience. Most visitors only have a few weeks for a holiday, and a trek along one trail section, such as Dolpa, is designed to be a perfect fit.’
yaks are still used as pack animals, ’ says Boustead. ’ They carry firewood, produce and smuggled goods from China.’

’ And nothing from the yak is wasted,’ he continues. Dolpapa weave yak hair into warm blankets and clothing, the skin is used for leather, and their milk is a crucial part of the high-altitude diet. You’ll notice many stone walls in Dolpa covered in drying yak dung – an essential fuel where trees are scarce.’

FUNGAL VIAGRA
Another animal playing an important role in the Dolpapa’s lives is the yarsagumba (literally ’summer grass, winter insect’) - the mummified body of a Himalayan bat moth caterpillar that has been infected by a fungus, Ophiocordyceps sinensis. Found in Himalayan alpine areas at around 4,000 metres, it’s prized, especially in China, for its supposed aphrodisiac properties. Others believe it to be a medicinal panacea, curing everything from headaches to cancer.

Fetching up to £650 per kilogram for collectors, the yarsagumba has become something of a cash cow for the Dolpapa. Ever-growing numbers head to the mountains every May and June, hoping to get rich on this elusive fungal viagra.

’ Nobody knows if the yarsagumba harvest is sustainable,’ says Shahi. ’ It isn’t doing the local ecology much good, but you can’t blame the Dolpapa for trying to earn a better living. They’ve already proven they’re adept at extracting what they can from an extreme environment.’

BRIGHT FUTURE
For today’s Dolpapa, and the trekkers with whom they now share their striking environment, the district’s trails remain as challenging and rewarding as they were for the caravans of yesteryear. Tibetan salt has lost its value, but trade and high-altitude travel remain the key to existence in this dramatic Himalayan wilderness. Nepal’s Hidden Valley may be giving up its secrets, but this is still a land that demands strong legs and a stout heart, as well as a little business acumen.

Boustead has high hopes for the future of the GHT. ’ I would love to see the trail developed as a multi-country initiative, just like the Camino de Santiago in Europe. It will then have real power to change people’s lives,’ he says. ’ The GHT is a celebration of all things Himalaya, a region where the history, culture and wildlife know no boundaries. It would be wonderful to see trekkers being able to explore unhindered, too.’

Getting there
World Expeditions specialises in treks on the Great Himalaya Trail. Its Dolpo Traverse expedition takes 26 days and costs £3,090, which includes airport transfers, internal flights, board and lodging, and a track pack containing a mountain-grade sleeping bag, trekking jacket and other specialist equipment.

When to go
In autumn (August to November), the weather is dry and relatively warm and, following the monsoon, visibility in the mountains is at its best. Spring (February to April) is also good, with warm weather and blooming rhododendrons.

Further information
www.thegreathimalayatrail.org
www.greathimalayatrail.com
www.worldexpeditions.com
www.pematrek.com