Hugh Swift

A TRAVERSE OF THE GREAT HIMALAYAN RANGE

Two for no roads

by Hugh Swift and Arlene Blum

Arlene Blum

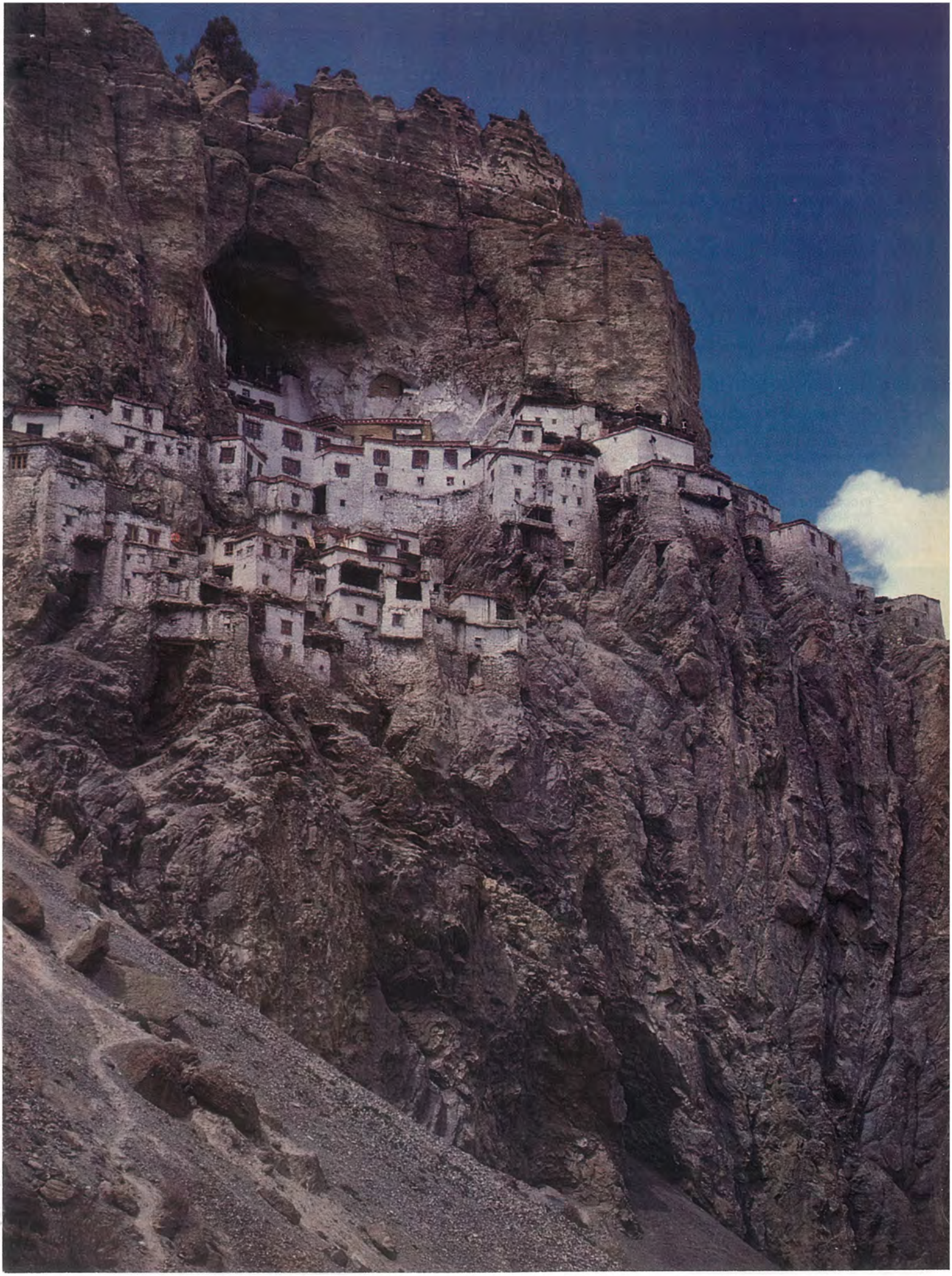
Bhutanese masked dancer (top); Tibetan traders (above) carry homespun blankets to sell at bazaars in central Nepal; the architecture of Phuktal Monastery, in Ladakh (left), makes it seem to grow out of the cliffs.

We all have our own once-in-a-lifetime travel dream. Beginning in September 1981 the two of us had a chance to live ours while we trekked along most of the Himalayan range, the highest mountains in the world. It took ten months of almost steady hiking in mountainous regions of Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Pakistan to complete the "impossible" walk.

Looking back, the greatest hazards of the long trail ultimately proved to be newly built roads or disappearing paths and large, unfordable streams or tiny unfindable fleas. But as we began the imposing task of planning logistics, permits, and route, other concerns occupied our thoughts: Could we get permission from the governments of both India and Nepal for two rarely granted border crossings? How should we arrange to have supplies and mail reach us monthly in remote areas? And how could we amass and organize the clothing, tents, and supplemental food that we would need?

When people hike in the Himalaya, they usually walk—or trek, as it has come to be called—for periods of time lasting from ten days to a month. What the two of us basically would be doing was

Arlene Blum



stringing together trek upon trek. It would be as if we were to walk the length of the Rocky Mountains instead of limiting ourselves to a week-long hike.

There are three general styles of trekking. Trekking on one's own is the least expensive and can be the most rewarding, if one has the time and the patience. Individual treks may otherwise be designed through a touring company in Katmandu or New Delhi or through a U.S. company such as California's Mountain Travel. In Nepal, for example, trails to Everest, around Annapurna, and through the Langtang Valley have primitive hotels and restaurants at which an individual can find accommodations and meals on the trek. The third alternative is to join an organized group, as the majority of people do, such as those offered by The Great Himalayan Treks (see accompanying box). At least a basic knowledge of the language of the country one will be visiting is most useful; for those planning to veer from the more established routes, hiring an English-speaking guide is essential.

Our trek was distinct for its scope, duration, and format, and the chronicle that follows is meant to provide both the novice and experienced trekker with a paradigm of what a trip of such—or less—magnitude entails. With the exception of Bhutan, where trekking is limited to four or five prescribed routes, all the areas we covered are regions where anyone may go. We made every effort, however, to avoid the "standard" routes unless absolutely necessary.

First Stop, Bhutan

Nearly a year after we began planning, we arrived in the town of Tashigang, in eastern Bhutan, a week's ride over pavement, dirt, and mud from the nearest available airport. Mostly closed to Western trekkers, Bhutan is the world's only Buddhist kingdom. Its people's lives have changed very little over the last century. The governor of Tashigang, the Dzongda, had personally telephoned the gap, or mayor, at Tashi Yangtse Dzong (our starting point) to arrange for horses to carry our supplies as we actually began our long-

Deceptive distances: after crossing the Narak La, in Ladakh, the authors had to descend and reascend 5,000 feet to reach the next pass, seen in this picture's upper center.

Arlene Blum

awaited Himalayan traverse westward. The mayor's request for men and horses had fallen upon disinterested ears. All the local men had harvesting work to finish and had no interest in carrying our supplies—even for a mere three days to the neighboring valley. Our hopes for a quick departure fell, but we could console ourselves by admiring the nearby hills: thickly forested flanks of the great monsoon-drenched Himalayan range rose above the stone-paved courtyard of the ancient *dzong* where we stood. (Dzongs are Bhutanese-style medieval fortresses that once protected the citizenry in case of attack but presently are used to house offices of the civil administration and Buddhist monks.) Soon, however, the reluctance of the local men was overcome during an alfresco meeting with the mayor. The five men who came, two with their horses, were hard workers and fine companions, ever willing to share their trail snacks of fresh peaches and roasted corn.

Bear Necessities

And what a trail we found! Before leaving Tashi Yangtse Dzong, we had been told that people rarely used the path and that three bridges were out, but the villagers' strongest warnings had been reserved for bears. We were advised to make loud noises in camp if bears were heard at night—the same remedy we use at home in the Sierras.

The first pass of the many score we would cross was brilliant with clusters of pink and white flowers, although clouds cut off the hoped-for views of Tibetan border peaks. Still, after a day and a half's walk and a climb of nearly a mile, we had encountered no bears. The descent proved to be quite another matter: we plunged down a never-ending mud-clogged trough of yellow clay. We were forced to walk directly through the quagmire because the nearby leaf-covered ground and adjacent trailside bushes were alive with thirsty brown leeches. Late in the afternoon we stumbled exhausted into our home for the night, an altar room of the first house we had seen since the pass.

Hugh Swift is the author of The Trekker's Guide To The Himalaya and Karakoram; *Arlene Blum is the author of* Annapurna—A Woman's Place. *Both books are published by Sierra Club Books.*

The next morning we awoke refreshed to see blue skies and snow peaks. We began to experience a theme familiar to all trekkers: our fortunes could quickly rise or fall, sometimes within an instant. A morning's walk might be on a muddy trail in hellish sun, while the afternoon was shaded, scenic bliss. One day began with a wretched stony path that soon leveled off into an orchard where people gave us fresh tangerines. We could never anticipate the best moments and learned to enjoy each hour and each day as it came.

The next two weeks we walked westerly across Bhutan, stopping at the dzongs of Lhuntsi, Jakar, and Tongsa to meet the driver of the Land Rover we had engaged, which would slowly return along the lower road with the remainder of our supplies. We hiked as far as Wangdi Phodrang Dzong, where we enjoyed an archery tournament, Bhutan's national sport. Local beer called arrah is quaffed during the daylong tournaments, and soon we learned each participant's own style of play and each became a distinct personality.

By the time we reached Wangdi Phodrang, we had walked over six passes. We needed to drive the last one, the Dochung La, to reach Paro Dzong, where we would link up with a group of trekkers who would join our walk over high, circuitous paths near Chomolhari, on the Tibetan border, and on to Thimphu, in Bhutan. The traverse of eastern and central Bhutan had been a first for us, with no certainty of how many days would be needed to reach Wangdi, but when we left the roadhead at Dukyel Dzong, near Paro, we were on a fairly well-traveled route where our Bhutanese guides knew ahead of time our camps for the next ten days. Hiking on this standard route did not diminish our excitement or mean that the walking became any easier. After a stiff climb of 5,000 feet, we emerged onto high rolling pastureland near the Tibetan border. In this remote region, yak herders live in black yak-hair tents, often alone for days on end. We shared their milky, bouillonlike butter tea inside the loosely woven but rainproof tents, and the rough-hewn herders' warm hospitality created an easy rapport with us and our guides.

Butter and white cheese are the principal cash crops of the herders, and

Arlene Blum

our "down-country" staff was glad to get up-country prices and excellent fresh milk products for the forthcoming winter holidays. For a week we saw large herds of bharal, the blue sheep, grazing unconcerned above the trail. The bharal undoubtedly provide an occasional feast for roving, unseen snow leopards. During three days' walk we had perspectives of symmetrical Chomolhari, one of Bhutan's highest peaks, at 23,997 feet. On both its eastern and western flanks, ancient passes lead to unused trails that centuries ago took travelers to the Tibetan

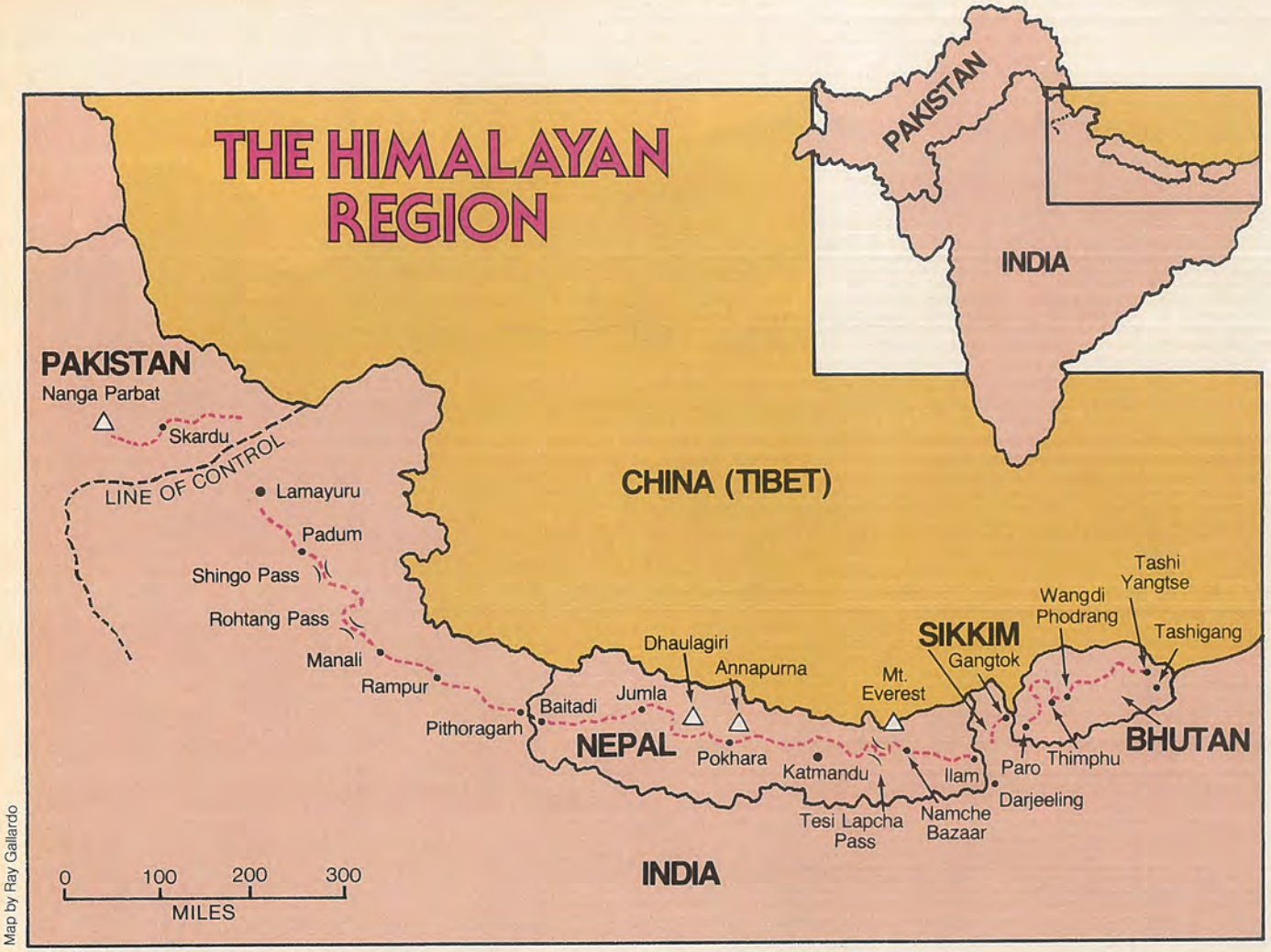
Ujon Choling Monastery, in Bhutan. Life in Bhutan has changed little over the centuries; the government is now beginning to modernize carefully while preserving traditional values.

fortress cities of Phari and Gyangtse.

We had come to feel at home in the upper meadows and hospitable villages of medieval Bhutan, a country emerging slowly and comfortably from its traditional past. But our five weeks in this country were at an end, and the two of us left both Bhutan and our hiking companions for Darjeeling, India, the largest town we would see until Nepal's capital of Katmandu, six weeks hence.

Tea And Sympathy

Darjeeling is a ridge-topping British hill-station-turned-resort. It is known for its famed sunrise views of Kangchenzonga, the world's third highest peak, a colossal mountain astride the Indo-Nepalese border, locally called the House of Five Treasures for its five summits. After two clear, glorious sunrises and two evenings of teary, coal-smoke-choked air in Darjeeling, we were ready for a quick look at the nearby Indian state of Sikkim. Gangtok, Sikkim's capital, was jammed with Sikkimese for the Dalai Lama's first visit in over 25 years. We were treated to a speech in English by Tibet's former ruler, given before a colorful, largely non-English-speaking audience that nonetheless enjoyed and venerated his presence. Leaving crowded Gangtok, we walked for two days in the southern hills, stopping at the revered monastery of Rumtek and passing many rice terraces ringed with cardamom trees.



But we longed for the roadless areas and rapidly went by taxi and truck to Ilam, Nepal, a roadhead bazaar town five miles west of the Indian border. Not many people choose to walk in the Ilam area, but they could, once they got a trekking permit, the easily obtainable permission required of all who hike in Nepal. It is well worth the visit. At Ilam we began the longest part of our traverse, a continuous walk that would involve 185 different camps and take nearly eight months before we reached Lamayuru Monastery, in Ladakh, India, far to the northwest.

Ilam, like all of Nepal, was beginning the annual week-long Desai festival. Still, we soon found two porters and quickly walked out of the bazaar through waist-high rows of Nepal's best-known tea-growing fields and on to the west. Our porters, like many in the Himalaya, were farmers between crops who agreed to carry our gear in order to make some extra cash. The second night out our foursome reached bamboo-encircled Rabi Bazaar. While still en route we had met hundreds of people returning from Desai festivities at Rabi, and we thought the party must be over. We were quite wrong. The streets and squares were alive, mostly with adolescents of the Limbu clan engaged in a slow-moving hand-in-hand dance that appeared endless—so endless, in fact, that when we awoke after a night's sleep, the same lines and circles of people appeared almost unchanged, softly singing and slowly dancing.

Friends Along The Way

At the large hill town of Dhankuta the two of us bade good-bye to our porters and met the first of four trekking groups that would accompany us for a third of the distance across Nepal. Our traverse was financed, as many treks are, by a percentage of each person's trek cost, and we very much enjoyed the sociability of having old and new friends walk with us. Our immediate objective was Namche Bazaar, the busy town south of Mount Everest to which all trekkers and mountaineers must hike in order to see or climb the world's highest peak from the south. We passed through areas inhabited by the Rai and Limbu clans, members of which have worked as soldiers in Gurkha regiments of the Indian and British armies. We surmised that the do-or-die determination these soldiers bring to fighting must come from the same wellspring of tenacity that enables them to plow the fields and build the terraces of their steep and rocky homeland.

Near Namche Bazaar we glimpsed Mount Everest and parted with a group of trekkers who were diverging northward to walk to the high point called Kala Pattar, where an excellent view of Mount Everest is obtained. Thousands of people trek in the Mount Everest region every year, and although the area is well visited, nearly everyone who hikes there experiences his own sense of discovery. Meanwhile we hired a Sherpa (who had just finished carrying loads above 26,000 feet for the American Everest Medical Expedition),

and he hired a crew of three to join us. The six of us set out from Namche for the Tesi Lapcha, an 18,990-foot pass that would be the high point of the entire traverse. By this time it was near the end of November, and we climbed higher in the chilling shade for hours at a time. For one day the ice on Hugh's beard never thawed, and at a difficult place where one glacier calved off onto another, we rappeled down a 50-foot ice step.

During December and the first half of January we walked over snow-covered ridges and along fertile land cultivated by Magars, Gurungs, Tamangs, and other clans of Nepal's central region. Nepali, the national language, is understood by most of the kingdom's hill people. We practiced the language with locals, who in most of the places we visited rarely saw Westerners. While this is not one of the popular trekking routes, it is a fascinating and relatively easy place to trek.

When In Nepal . . .

We separated here from our last companions, and for the next eight weeks' walk through the wilds of western Nepal, until we reached the border of India, we were on our own, entirely out of touch with the rest of the world. During a brief respite earlier in Katmandu, we had met through friends three young Nepalese, Dil Bahadur Rai, Ram Bahadur Tamang, and Danu Sherpa—their last names indicate the clan to which each belongs—whom we engaged to carry our gear and cook food. But when food was bought and loads packed, we had too many supplies and needed to find a couple more porters. This was quite a predicament. We wanted people willing to work for five months, not the usual two days to two weeks, and we wanted people to travel to far-off Ladakh, not up the river valley or over a few ridges. In harmony with the mysterious ways of the East, however, good fortune graced our situation, as one of our guides chanced upon an old friend who joined us.

Our crew members, in typical Nepalese fashion, were completely satisfied if they could eat their food of choice, rice and lentils, locally called dalbhat, every day for every meal. Even when several different types of lentils were available, they habitually chose only

continued on page 150 ——►

TREKKING THE GREAT HIMALAYAN RANGE

As a sequel to the successful treks associated with the traverse of the great Himalayan range, Arlene Blum is organizing a series of theme treks in Nepal for 1983–1984. The goal of these Great Himalayan Treks is to give the trekker the opportunity to learn new skills and to get to know the Nepalese people while walking among the magnificent Himalayan mountains.

Technical abilities are not required to trek. All participants should be strong hikers in excellent health with stamina, determination, and a spirit of adventure. Experienced Sherpas will make all camp arrangements and provide meals. Trek leaders will share their skills with trekkers and introduce them to the local Nepalese. Trekkers need carry only a small pack for day use as they walk along and enjoy Nepal.

Upcoming organized treks include:

Everest, The Canadian Way. Led by mountaineer Lauri Skreslet, the first Canadian to climb Mount Everest.
DATES: 22-day trek: September 17–October 17, 1983.... COST: $1,990 plus air fare
DATES: 16-day trek: October 8–November 1, 1983..... COST: $1,790 plus air fare

In The Shadow of Manaslu. A 25-day trek to the spectacular and rarely visited environs of Manaslu (26,650 feet), the world's ninth highest mountain.
DATES: October 22–November 23, 1983..... COST: $1,850 plus air fare

Nutrition and Diet Trek. Anna Ferroluzzi, M.D. and professor of nutrition, and Arlene Blum will lead a 21-day nutrition and diet trek in far eastern Nepal. Weight and body composition changes will be monitored during the trek.
DATES: November 21–December 19, 1983..... COST: $1,895 plus air fare

Solu Family Trek. A 14-day family trek to the prosperous Sherpa-inhabited Solu Valley, south of Mount Everest, will be led by Charles Gay, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in this region, and his wife, Pam Ross, along with their three-year-old son.
DATES: December 10, 1983–January 1, 1984 ..... COST: $1,595 plus air fare

Holiday Photography Trek. A Katmandu Valley photography workshop and ten-day trek south of the Annapurna range will be led by Arlene Blum and Pamela Roberson. Daily lectures on technical and artistic aspects of photography and critiques of trekkers' own slide assignments will be given (slides will be specially developed in Katmandu).
DATES: December 17, 1983–January 9, 1984 ..... COST: $1,850 plus air fare

Nepali Language Trek. A 15-day Nepali language trek along the ancient trade route between Katmandu and Pokhara. Two hours of basic Nepali language instruction will be given each day.
DATES: January 7–29, 1984..... COST: $1,495 plus air fare

Yoga Trek. An 18-day yoga trek along the Hindu and Buddhist pilgrimage route to Muktinath north of Annapurna; yoga instruction will be given twice daily.
DATES: February 25–March 21, 1984..... COST: $1,575 plus air fare

For more information, write Great Himalayan Treks; c/o Mountain Travel Inc.; 1398 Solano Ave.; Albany, CA 94706 (415-527-8100; toll free outside California: 800-227-2384).

For information on trekking in the beautiful and seldom-visited Himalayan regions of India, contact the Government of India Office of Tourism; 30 Rockefeller Plaza; New York, NY 10112 (212-586-4901); or Jogindar Singh; Air India; 15 Barakhamba Rd.; New Delhi 110001; India.

The Kingdom of Bhutan is open for group trekking on certain specific routes. Details are available from Marie Brown; Bhutan Travel Service; 120 E. 56th St.; New York, NY 10022 (212-838-6382).

continued from page 137

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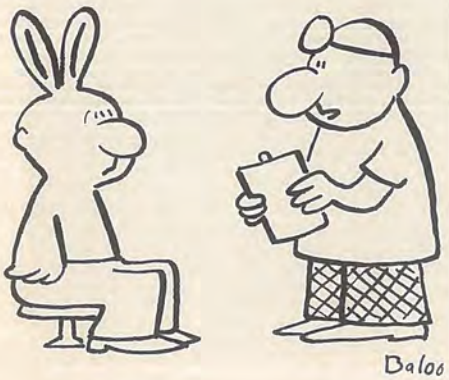
one kind, and we had to request that they vary their purchases for our sakes. Our basic diet consisted of dalbhat and wheat cakes, called chapatis, to which we added freeze-dried food carried with us and local vegetables like spinach, potatoes, and cauliflower on the rare occasions when they could be found. Food was purchased from people along the way if they had anything to sell, which often they did not. We passed very few shops in all of west Nepal. When a basic item was for sale we usually bought plenty, as it might not be available again for some time. In one lone hamlet we all gorged on delicious, creamy yogurt, a delicacy not to be seen again until we reached India.

Our route across west Nepal at first went south of the 40-mile-long Dhaulagiri Himal, with its highest summit of 26,810 feet. For much of the distance south of Dhaulagiri we followed a river valley that on our map had a trail paralleling the river. But the map was old, and we quickly discovered that no such trail existed. Instead we found ourselves rising and descending thousands of feet and clambering into and out of numerous side valleys. Then we ascended the deep Bheri River gorge and walked through snow for six days, crossing a 13,000-foot pass through waist-deep snow. This brought us to Jumla, a gritty town with a stone-paved bazaar where we happily recovered two duffels of supplies carried up for us by friends who were then in a northern valley studying the snow leopard. Beyond Jumla we sought lower ground, for it was February and the high country remained blocked with snow. For another month our route led west until we reached Baitadi and could overlook the Mahakali River, which forms the western boundary of Nepal.



"It would appear that you have an ingrown hare."

The Rites Of Spring

When we arrived, on March 8, the border guard looked disbelievingly at our specially annotated visas for India. He would have to consult with his superior. This authority, however, was stationed 24 kilometers up-valley, and it wasn't until 1:30 A.M. that he arrived and politely awoke us to scrutinize our passports. They were in order, and entry was duly permitted, although the passports couldn't be stamped until we reached Pithoragarh a day later. Once in India we were able to find fresh vegetables, a most welcome addition to our diet.

As we continued, our direction became northwesterly and we entered the area once known as Uttarakhand, the ancient Land of the Gods. Although all these areas are open and easily accessible, few Western trekkers ever visit the Indian Himalaya. Every summer, however, thousands of native Indian pilgrims and tourists converge on these spectacular hills to visit holy places and perform rites dating back to Vedic times. Pilgrims are called *yatris*, and we met our first as we descended a 10,000-foot-high ridge. Judging from the absence of footprints in the two-foot-deep snow, we were safe in assuming ourselves the first people to have crossed this particular ridge since the previous autumn.

By mid-May we prepared to head north into the regions of Lahul and Ladakh. The winter had been severe, and the 13,000-foot Rohtang Pass to the north remained covered with 20 feet of snow. Extra food would be needed, and to carry it we hired three more Nepalese porters. We crossed the Rohtang Pass on a cloudy, almost windless day. These were the best conditions possible, and we breathed easier, especially after having heard stories about those who had recently died on the pass and having encountered a dozen people suffering from snow blindness contracted while crossing the Rohtang.

The Shingo Pass

As we proceeded through Lahul we walked in terrain that reminded us of Tibet. People appeared Mongolian, and their homes had flat roofs. Our pace slowed as we ascended the 16,400-foot Shingo Pass. This route from Lahul over the Shingo Pass into Zanskar is often trekked in the summer; at this time of year, however, we were the first outsiders in six months to cross the path. Monal pheasants screeched and swooped, landing at a run as they traveled from one endless snowfield to another. Our porters ate ground-up garlic, a treatment they all agreed was effective in forestalling headaches brought on by the elevation. We camped at 15,000 feet, below the pass, and watched clouds effortlessly float high above into Ladakh.

Hoarfrost glistened on Buddhist prayer flags at the top of the Shingo Pass. We gaily trooped down the Shingo's northern slopes into the Zanskar area of the larger region called Ladakh. Several hours later at the snow line the first creatures we saw were about 30 grazing black yaks who patiently nosed aside the thin snow layer to reveal stunted tufts of dry grass. We continued for three more days before reaching Padum, Zanskar's administrative center, a dusty town of mud-covered buildings. From Padum we embarked on the last week of our traverse together, walking first along a wide, dry river valley and then through a series of steep, narrow canyons. We crossed five more passes, all but one higher than 14,000 feet in elevation. On June 15 we reached Lamayuru Monastery, our destination, located not far south of the Line of Control, India's undemarcated border with Pakistan. Satisfaction mingled with fatigue as we piled our gear onto a truck and headed for the Kashmir Valley—after ten months of hiking, finally permitting ourselves to travel westward by road and motor. ■