

By Arlene Blum

Two mountaineers hike the Himalayas from end to end

The leader of the American women's team that climbed Annapurna reports on an arduous 2,000-mile journey from Bhutan to Ladakh

Although the sun had not yet set, night had already come to the dense leech-filled forest in remote eastern Bhutan. I was attempting to make my way through the forest down a steep V-shaped trough of yellow mud filled with half a foot of water. On September 21, 1981, the second day of what would prove to be a nine-month up-and-down journey across the Himalayas, I was afraid I was lost.

Only yesterday morning my traveling companion, Hugh Swift, and I, with five Bhutanese accompanying us, had cheerfully marched out of Tashi Yang-tsi Dzong near the eastern border of Bhutan, the starting point for our "walk" along the length of the world's highest and most magnificent mountain range: the Great Himalayan Range. During the next nine months, Hugh and I—calling our venture the Great Himalayan Traverse (GHT)—hoped to cross the kingdom of Bhutan, part of the Indian state of Sikkim, the entire kingdom of Nepal and the Indian Himalaya. Our destination was Ladakh, a trans-Himalayan region in northern India. Although two other parties, one from New Zealand and another from India, were attempting similar walks at the same time, no one had ever completed such a trip and we didn't know whether we could do it either.

Earlier in the day we had crossed the Donga La (12,500 feet)—the first crossing of that pass by Westerners. On the descent I lingered too long in a meadow of luxuriant wild flowers, assuming my companions, who had gone on ahead, would camp soon.



Near end of traverse, trekkers cross a steep scree slope below Narak La, a pass in India's Zaskar region.



In Mt. Everest region of eastern Nepal, Blum's party crosses the Tesi Lapcha Pass—at 19,000 feet the

highest pass of the traverse. The descent from this pass required negotiating an almost vertical ice face



Peak 29 near Manaslu in central Nepal offers one of the spectacular vistas and seasonal contrasts of the trek.

But below the meadow the forest trail, washed away by recent monsoon rains and eroded by the hoofs of herds of cows, was almost impassable. As I felt my way down the slippery trail, I couldn't help wondering what I was doing here.

Ten years ago I'd spent six months climbing in Ethiopia, Uganda, Iran and Afghanistan. Now these countries are irreversibly changed and inaccessible to me. The Himalayan foothills are one of the last major inhabited areas untouched by modernization. For weeks at a time one can cross areas without roads, electricity or shops. But roads are being built and change is coming. I wanted to visit the Himalayan villages and spend time with these people before their traditional way of life was altered by outside influences. So did Hugh, a running friend from Berkeley, California, who had just finished writing *The Trekker's Guide to the Himalaya and Karakoram*. His knowledge of terrain and geography was essential for our venture.

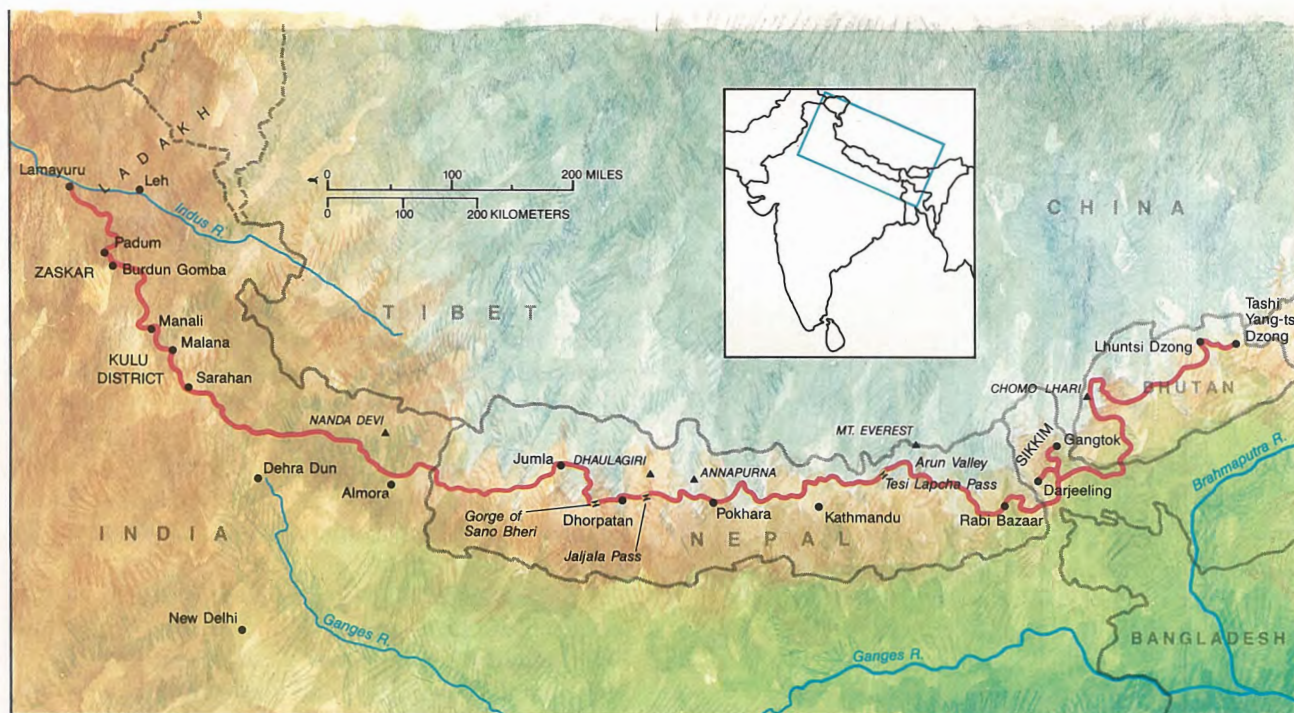
Still, we didn't know if we could do it. The Himalayan mountains extend more than 1,000 miles from east to west. Our devious switchbacking route would be close to twice that distance. We would have to piece together rarely used trails, continually descending into the mighty gorges of rivers that drain into the Ganges and Indus and climbing back up to high, desolate ridges.

Lost on the walk's second day

And here I was on only the second day, alone in the dark on the worst trail I'd ever encountered, beginning to fear I had somehow taken the wrong path. Finally, I heard the voice of our Bhutanese horseman, who had returned with a small flashlight to show me the way to the next village.

Our accommodations there, on the hard wooden floor of the village *gomba* (Buddhist temple), seemed almost luxurious. A bronze statue of Buddha gazed serenely above brightly burning butter lamps. Local villagers wandered in to say a few prayers, spin the prayer wheels and stare at us with polite curiosity. The village headman told us we were the first Westerners ever to visit his village.

Archery is the national sport in Bhutan, and a tournament (p. 110) was in progress the next day when we reached Lhuntsi Dzong. Two teams of archers were matched in pairs, each intent on hitting a target 150 yards away across a ravine. Each man lifted his five-foot bow, unloosed an arrow with a lunge and a great cry, and then ran after the arrow, yelling as if to urge it to the target. On the rare occasions when the target was hit, the archers would all dance about wildly, singing loudly and swigging *arrak*, the local fermented rice beverage. As the day progressed, the



Map shows route of the Great Himalayan Traverse, from start at Tashi Yang-tsi Dzong in eastern Bhutan

through parts of Sikkim, Nepal and the Indian Himalaya to end point in Ladakh in northern India.

shooting became increasingly enthusiastic and increasingly wide of the mark.

Our route in Bhutan, as elsewhere, would climb up to a ridge or pass between 6,000 and 19,000 feet high and then plunge down to a river, usually between 1,000 and 4,000 feet. We had gone from fall weather at our starting point in Tashi Yang-tsi Dzong to winter on the high pass, then down the terrible mud-leech trail to find spring at the village *gomba* and summer while we were trudging along the river below. At the archery tournament we had returned to fall. This was typical. In any few days of our walk, we would encounter changes in vegetation from tropical jungle to bamboo forests to temperate woodlands to mountain fir forests to rock and snow above the timberline. Indeed, some pass crossings were like walking from Florida to Alaska and back again. In the morning, I often wore a sweater, down jacket, mittens and a furry hat; by midday, I'd be wearing a T-shirt and thin cotton pants; I would have to bundle up again in the evening.

The highest elevations we reached in Bhutan were as we approached Chomo Lhari, a 24,000-foot-high holy mountain on the northwest border between Bhutan and Tibet. We crossed a high valley inhabited by nomadic yak herders and herds of rare blue sheep known as *bharal*, and camped near a family that was looking after 300 large, hairy yaks. The nomad's way of life is totally dependent on the yak: inside an octagonal yak-wool tent, we sat on a bearskin in front of

a smoky fire beneath drying hunks of yak cheese. A mother, nursing her eight-day-old baby, chewed hunks of yak butter, then fed them to the infant.

The yak-herder's son showed me his science book—in English—which told of men walking on the moon. Most young people in Bhutan are getting a chance to go to school, where they study English, science and traditional Buddhist subjects. This is in line with the wishes of the popularly revered late king, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, whose goal was to slowly modernize the country while maintaining its cultural heritage. Wangchuck voluntarily gave up his absolute power, instituted land reforms, and started schools and hospitals across the country.

We arrived in Sikkim on October 21, 1981, in time to see another great Himalayan leader. The Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists, had returned to Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, for the first time since 1958. Sikkimese from all over the country thronged to a polo field to hear him urge them to live so as to increase the happiness and decrease the suffering of all sentient beings.

As we crossed the eastern Indian-Nepalese border a few days later the roadside sign proclaimed, "Welcome to Nepal." We were at once caught up in one of the many festivals celebrated in this mountainous Hindu kingdom. This was the Day of the Dog, part of a Hindu holiday called Tihar. On this day, all the local dogs—even the mangiest street pariahs—were fed a good meal and decked out with a red *tika* mark on their foreheads and a garland of marigolds around their necks (p. 110). Some of the dogs looked rather uncomfortable in their unaccustomed finery.

The Day of the Dog was preceded by the Day of the

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At an archery meet in Bhutan, one team celebrates a "hit"; accuracy here is not as high as are spirits.



Nepalese woman swings at Tihar festival honoring various gods, animals and the family money box.



Garlanded dogs are treated royally on second day of Tihar; other days are devoted to crows, sacred cows.

Crow and followed by the Day of the Cow, the Day of the Family Money Box and the Day of the Brother, each being honored in turn. Outside many villages, temporarily constructed wood-and-bamboo Ferris wheels and 30-foot-high swings (left) are used by the villagers, who, according to legend, believe their upward motion helps the annual rice crop to grow high and healthy. Because there is no electricity to power the Ferris wheels, a volunteer jumps up and grabs the leg of one of the occupants and pulls to keep the wheel moving.

After a 20-mile hike on up-and-down trails, we approached the Limbu town of Rabi Bazaar in the twilight. Hundreds of people were celebrating Tihar. Men gambled with cards and dice on the fairgrounds, and in town lines of young men and women held hands as they slowly and somberly danced in the traditional Limbu fashion. The town was so crowded that we couldn't find a place to pitch our tents, so we slept on the floor in the basement of a restaurant. Or rather, we tried to sleep. The music and dancing went on all night.

"How long does this festival last?" I asked a beautiful olive-skinned woman, whose round gold earrings were three inches in diameter.

"Very long," she answered.

"When will the dancing end?" I inquired, surprised at the fact that no one seemed to have stopped to sleep.

"It is a continuous festival, for many days," she announced, and then went back to the dancing.

Stopped by a vertical ice wall

After two months of enjoying festivals across Bhutan and East Nepal, we reached the geographical high point of the whole traverse, the bleak, windswept Tesi Lapcha Pass at 19,000 feet (p. 106). Recently we had trudged up the hot Arun Valley, less than 1,000 feet above sea level, and as we approached 19,000 feet my legs felt leaden and I gasped for breath. Slowly we ascended the final slopes to the pass. To the north an enormous monolithic peak thrust its way into the cobalt-blue sky; to the south Pacharmo, a soft white mountain, seemed to float before my eyes—reward enough for overcoming gravity to this height.

Making our way carefully down the edge of an ice-fall where towering monuments glistened in the late-afternoon sun, we were stopped by a vertical ice wall. We pitched our tents above the wall.

At dawn, we attached a fixed line to two metal ice screws which were fastened into the ice face and descended, wearing metal spikes called crampons on our boots and using ice axes for balance. Then, suddenly, everything changed. We were walking on dirt, enjoying the miraculous sight of tender green grass

and minuscule white and pink flowers. There were still icicles frozen in Hugh's beard. Several hours below the icefall we saw birds, yaks, people—and suddenly it was hot. Our porters, high-altitude folk, announced that they must return to their homes. They accepted their salaries with a warm smile and a nod of the head to indicate their gratitude. The Nepali language has no word for “thank you.” For the next six weeks we crossed the relatively prosperous central Nepal countryside with several trekking groups.

In early January we said good-bye to the last group of trekkers. We were about to enter West Nepal, the most isolated section of our trip. No roads, electricity, running water or well-stocked shops were to be found in the regions that we would cross during the next few weeks. When we told the local people that we were heading west, they were most alarmed.

“There are said to be fierce wild animals and bandits out there. You'd better be careful,” a farmer told us. “The people there don't even speak good Nepali. And they don't like strangers,” his wife added.

Tragedy in a village square

Three Nepalese agreed to accompany us and help carry our loads: Dil Bahadur Rai, Danu Sherpa and Pasang Tamang. But at the last moment we decided to hire two more porters to lighten everyone's loads. Dumbur Bahadur Tamang and Prem Singh Gurung were walking down the road and agreed to go with us.

A few days later we crossed the Jaljala Pass (12,000 feet) and camped in an exquisite high meadow with sparkling views of Dhaulagiri Himal. In the morning we wandered down through oak, rhododendron and pine forests to the Tibetan-inhabited town of Dhorpatan, where a friend of ours had worked as a doctor several years ago. A shopkeeper stopped us.

“Is any of you a doctor?”

“No.”

“Do you have any medicine for these people?”

He pointed to four villagers crouched in the town square with third-degree burns over much of their bodies. A grass fire had got out of control near where they were gathering herbs. They had stumbled down here, desperately needing medical care. There was currently no doctor in Dhorpatan.

I took out my *Medicine for Mountaineering* and read about immediate “evacuation of the patient . . . fluid therapy . . . plasma and saline . . . penicillin and tetracycline.” The nearest road was about a ten-day walk; there was nothing to do. The burn victims were obviously extremely poor; at least I could give them money to buy food. As I gave each individual a 20-rupee note, I could not avoid looking in their eyes. Should we abandon our trip to try somehow to help



Arlene Blum and Tibetan friends enjoy meeting in West Nepal, sharing conversation and fried dumplings.



Hugh Swift makes his way up a trail in West Nepal; umbrella was essential gear for many weeks of trek.



Dance of the four skeletons is vivid part of festival celebrating Buddha's birthday at monastery in Zaskar.

these people? But where could we take them and what would they find there? We realized that there was little choice but to continue on our way, yet the look in the eyes of those four burn victims haunted me for a long time afterward.

In West Nepal, there were many days when we went from house to house trying to buy rice, with no luck. In the wild gorge of the Sano Bheri, we had to climb narrow mud paths up sheer rock walls. We also had to cross several memorable bridges: three small logs held together with vines, swaying a few inches above the torrent; an 80-foot-long log two feet wide cut in half for a level but treacherously slick surface; and a staircase of slippery boulders.

The map we were following was made by the Survey of India in 1927 and indicated a route across West Nepal following a series of rivers like the Sano Bheri. "A straight shot down the river," Hugh had remarked optimistically, looking at the faint dotted line drawn on the map more than 50 years ago. We were managing to get through, but "the straight shot down the river" seemed to involve going up and down thousands of feet around cliff faces and crossing numerous imaginatively constructed bridges.

Still without rice, we made camp. A Magar woman with an enormous nose ring gave us a pumpkin, the first fresh vegetable we had had for a week. We were delighted and offered to pay for it but the woman firmly refused our offer. Then a local shaman (holy man), wearing a white suit, threadbare brown sports coat and a large white turban, came down to our camp and presented us with a bag of "holy" rice.

"Eat this and you will succeed on your journey," he told us. I tried to pay him the going price. "No, not money. It is for the success of your trip."

"If you eat meat, it will snow"

To celebrate having got through the gorge, we decided to take a rest day and buy a goat, our first fresh meat in several weeks. Danu, our cook, was a Buddhist monk and at first he was not pleased at the idea of cooking meat.

"If you eat meat, it will begin to snow," he told us gravely. When he returned from the meat-getting expedition leading a small, pert goat on a leash, I relented and said, "Let's not eat him; let's take him along as a porter to help carry a load." We had seen caravans of goat and sheep porters carrying small loads of rice, grains, salt and sugar along the trails of West Nepal. However, now that the goat had been purchased, Danu sensibly thought we might as well go ahead and eat it.

"How many fleas have you killed on this trip?" Danu asked.



Brahman priest and son joined trek for crossing to Jumla; en route, priest sat down "to die" on slope.



After many memorable bridges, party crosses this precarious span near Padum, in India's Zaskar region.

"As many as I can," I said, "if they are in my tent."

"Then you shouldn't worry about killing a goat. Killing a flea or killing a goat is all the same thing."

The next time I saw the goat it was well roasted and delicious. The following day, thick wet snowflakes were blanketing our camp. When the snow ended we continued on our route along the river and a local fisherman brought us his day's catch. Again I asked Danu to cook it.

"If you eat fish, it will certainly rain," Danu informed us.

We ate the fish and the next day the rains began. Although we wisely refrained from eating fresh meat or fish for the rest of the trip, the weather never got better. This was one of the worst winters that West Nepal had ever experienced. As we continued to march along through the sleet and storm, our porters teased me by singing in Nepali, "*Memsahib maccha khamne bhane pani paryo*," meaning, You ate fish; that's why it's raining!

For several weeks, Jumla, the regional capital of West Nepal, was our goal. The route was obscure and we were unsure whether we could actually get there in the winter. We were delighted to meet a spry, agile 60-year-old Brahman priest and his bright-eyed 14-year-old son (above) who were returning to their home in Jumla. They proposed that we join forces to get through the snow and difficult terrain en route.

Repeatedly we had to climb from towns at 6,000

feet where it was raining to 10,000-foot-high passes in thickly falling snow. The Brahman said he had never seen the route to Jumla this snowy before.

Our last major obstacle before Jumla was a 1,500-foot climb straight up through deep snow over rock. Kicking my way up a gully of deep powder snow, I trudged behind the Jumla Brahman and his son.

Suddenly the old man sat down and announced, "I'm dying. Leave me here."

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Go on; I'm going to die."

"What's the matter?" I demanded.

"I haven't eaten anything in three days, and now I will die."

"You haven't eaten anything?" I was incredulous. He explained that a Brahman priest is required to wash in running water before he can eat rice. As we had been camping on snow, the old man had been unable to wash for several days. Following his religious principles, he had not eaten his rice in all those days. After struggling 1,000 feet up the steep slope, he had completely run out of energy. Now he would die.

I reached into my pack for a sugar mint cake that I kept for emergencies and gave him a piece, urging him to eat. He hesitated, quickly ate the first piece and then devoured the entire pound of mint cake. (Candy can be eaten without bathing, rice cannot.) I took his load: 40 pounds of rice and heavy iron cooking pots. Unburdened and energized by the sugar, the old man



A young Bhutanese shepherd displays the friendliness that greeted the trekkers across most of their route.

began to move slowly toward the pass. Hugh came down to help with the load and finally we reached the pass. Going down was easy, and quite suddenly the snow ended.

We had stepped from the cold and sterility of the winter snow to green spring fields. The Jumla Brahman immediately went over to a local well, washed himself thoroughly, sat down and proceeded to cook his rice.

After we crossed into India in early March, the local scene was quite similar to that of Nepal: brightly clad women with heavy gold jewelry returned from the forest laden with wood and fodder; men sat in large groups smoking hookahs and chatting; children tended buffalo and herded the cows, goats and sheep. But in India, we occasionally crossed paved roads and walked through villages with electricity, running water and shops stocked with food and goods from all over the country. Away from the roads, village life was untouched by the outside world.

Walking along, I noticed that women seemed to do most of the work. I would see them at dawn high in the trees, lopping off branches to feed the goats and cows, chopping and carrying the wood and fodder, hauling the drinking water, cooking the food, taking care of the house and children, washing dishes and clothes, doing virtually all the farm work. The women broke soil with picks, planted, weeded, thinned, harvested, threshed and ground the grain. They laughed and sang while they worked and did not hesitate to stop and have animated conversations with us as we walked by them.

Surprised at the incongruity between these women's work and their demeanor, I asked a local district commissioner, "Why do your women work so hard and yet seem so happy?"

"Women have a high status in our society," he told me, "because they do the work and the households couldn't survive without them. They are essential and they know it."

"Don't they mind that the men are mostly sitting around drinking tea, smoking and playing cards?"

"No," he said, "the men do the heaviest work: the plowing, the heaviest load-carrying. Of course, the men take care of the money. Women can't do that."

"Why?"

"Women can't handle money because they don't go to school."

"Why don't girls go to school?" I asked. Most of the schools we had walked by had had only one or two girl students amidst the dozens of boys.

"There's too much work for them to do. There's no time for girls to go to school."

Continuing beyond the highest village, our trail disappeared into wild, steep terrain. Our map did not show even a faint dotted line crossing the next pass. The only marks represented cliffs, and there was an ominous blank space indicating an unknown area. We fought our way through brush and bamboo, balanced up and down fallen logs, and finally found ourselves in deep, soft snow. With my boots I kicked steps into 35-degree slopes to the pass.

On the other side we had to descend straight down a rotten cliff of rock, dirt and bamboo, using our rope. Then we found a gully and whooshed down with great delight. We pitched our tents above the gully during a hail storm and collapsed, grateful for a level campsite and a chance to rest.

A well-dressed wedding party

The next morning we had no clues about which direction to go. As we dawdled over our breakfast, eight men dressed in fancy jackets, pressed pants and colorful woven scarves came sliding on their shoe soles down the snow. Since the people in the last village had told us that no one had crossed this pass in years, we were astonished.

"Where are you going?"

"We're going to a wedding."

We skipped down the snow, following the footprints of the wedding guests, crossing several ridges, descending across streams and through forests into Kulu District. I doubt if we could have found our way without the fortuitous wedding on just the right day. Just before the highest village, there was a welcome sign across the trail in English. Everyone was welcome at the wedding, and so we went.

In Kulu, every few days we came to a village just in time for its annual *mela* or fair in honor of the local god. In Sarahan we met their local god, a 500-year-old,

80-pound statue, as he was carried down from a hill-top where he had interceded with the rain god for a respite in the downpour that was threatening the crops. And indeed the sun shone for the next two weeks. In Malana, another Kulu village, the local god was less friendly. He had told the villagers they should have nothing to do with outsiders. Since the main trail goes through the village, foreigners could not be completely excluded, but we were warned that we should not set foot off the main path. In Manali, we enjoyed the biggest *mela* of all; gods from seven villages were honored by 60 dancers and thousands of spectators.

We also reached Burdun Gomba in Zaskar, Ladakh, on a most auspicious day. Once a year at the spring full moon, the *gomba* celebrates Buddha's birthday with a masked dance, enacting traditional stories from the life of the great Tantric master Padmasambhava (Lotus-born).

Zaskar reminded me of Bhutan where we had begun our walk. Both are Buddhist and medieval in life-style. But in the remote and peaceful kingdom of Bhutan,

Western influences are coming in a slow and controlled fashion. Ladakh, on the other hand, as part of democratic India, is experiencing rapid change.

As we walked north, we met a caravan of huge hairy yaks with enormous loads. They were heading back to the mountains.

"What are these loads?" I asked the monk who was herding the yaks.

"Dynamite to make roads and sugar to put in tea." These Western goods on the traditional beast of burden were a striking example of the changes that were inevitably coming, even to the most isolated regions.

On June 15, 1982, nine months after our departure from eastern Bhutan, we finally reached Lamayuru (below), a monastery situated dramatically on a barren hill just south of the restricted area leading to the India-Pakistan cease-fire line. We had had no idea where or when we would have to end our trip. Now we could go no farther. Suddenly, a monk approached us, asking, "Are you Hugh and Arlene?" We were dumbfounded. In the mysterious way of the East, word of our coming had preceded us.

Lamayuru monastery in Ladakh, an old Buddhist outpost on the rim of the Indus Valley, stands upon

a barren hill near the restricted region of the India-Pakistan cease-fire line. Traverse ended here.

