By Joel Quenby

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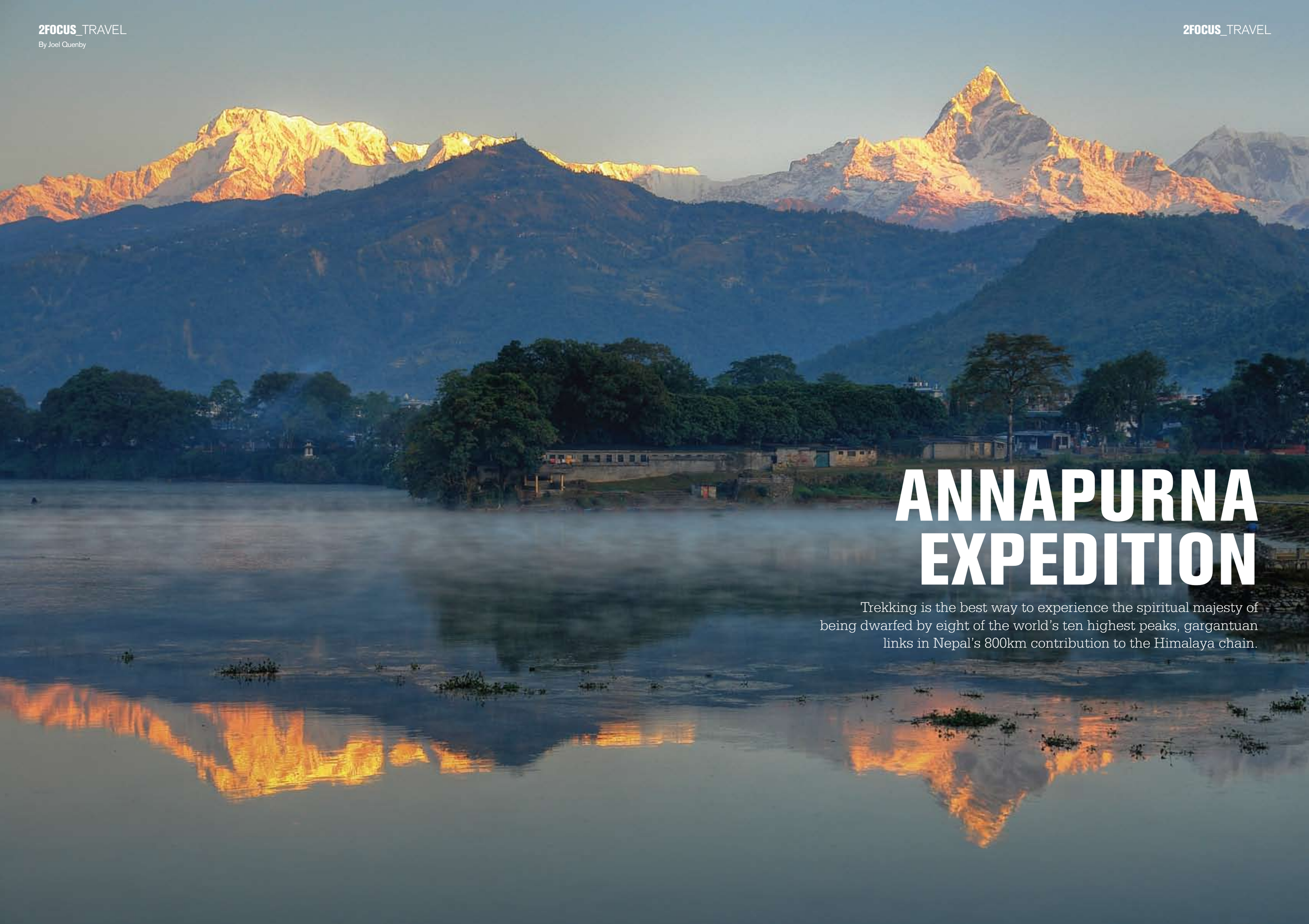

ANNAPURNA EXPEDITION

Trekking is the best way to experience the spiritual majesty of being dwarfed by eight of the world's ten highest peaks, gargantuan links in Nepal's 800km contribution to the Himalaya chain.

MY TWO FRIENDS and I were single-filing along a mountain footpath when a flurry of movement caught my peripheral vision. I looked up, just in time to see a stray yak come huffing and hurtling down the stony hillside, its eyes boggling wildly. The horned beast came to a skidding halt in front of us, hoofing up dust and blocking our path. It faced us down for a beat, then bowed its head – and charged.

Time froze. As did we – rooted to the spot, resembling a knock-kneed trio of blindfolded bullfighters. Thankfully, our long-suffering Nepali guide, DB, sprang into action, somehow summoning the wherewithal to find a brick-sized rock and hurl it at the enraged animal while issuing a war cry for good measure. The rock missed its target but, at the last second, the snorting bovine veered suddenly then went skittering down a steep slope into the valley below.

'Phew' doesn't cover it. The three of us exchanged alarmed glances. We hadn't envisioned a close-quarters episode of *When Animals Attack* on this trip. We'd joked about encountering the Abominable Snowman while trekking the Himalayas, but the likelihood of a skirmish with an enraged yak never occurred. So much for witnessing the joys of Mother Nature in all her bounteous glory; a prime specimen had almost just ram-raided me into an abyss.

Still, half-a-million people flocked to Nepal in 2008 (when tourist figures spiked 64 percent from the previous year), of which an estimated 90 percent went trekking. "After traveling on and off for ten years, Nepal is still the standout trip," says Australian Chiquita Mitchell.

NOT A WALK IN THE PARK

But a trek in Nepal is no piddling walk in the park. While there's usually no technical climbing, trails are often rough, steep, and precarious. You don't need to be Indiana Jones, but a moderate level of fitness is advisable. "I regretted not going for a few runs beforehand," says Brit Will Gilroy. Jo Pretsell agrees: "If you did some training I think it would make it more enjoyable; you could take time to really appreciate your surroundings."

One could spend months planning the minutiae of an expedition, but it's also possible to arrive in Kathmandu and arrange it all on the fly. Those who book organised treks with reputable overseas companies get everything pre-arranged, from airport transfers and meals to local guides and porters, national park permits, and hardcore 'four seasons' sleeping bags – essential for overnight stays at altitudes over 4,000 meters.

A more inexpensive option is to join an organized expedition as a 'walk-in' upon arrival. A yet cheaper way is to negotiate, often over glasses of steaming *chiya* (spiced tea), in the shops around Thamel, Kathmandu's backpacker ghetto, which is propped up by a competitive tourism infrastructure. Trekking independently is popular with budget travelers, who make their own arrangements, renting kit and clearing the minimal red tape locally, then lugging their own bags in their own sweet time.

Independent travelers are more vulnerable. Brit James Levene says that he and his girlfriend "had all our money stolen on the first night … Sadye had it in a money belt under her pillow, and some cheeky little urchin must have quite skilfully opened the window and delicately removed it."

A PILGRIMAGE BACK INTO TIME

The Nepal Mountaineering Association has designated 18 summits as trekking peaks. And mighty Everest lords over all like an immense white tidal wave, challenging the brave and foolhardy with the dubious promise of its death-or-glory march. Everest base camp is a prevalent trekking pilgrimage, but more than half of all visitors head to the Annapurna Himal, despite sneers from hiking snobs who compare its commercialized 'Costa Del Trekking' style unfavorably to lesser-trodden paths elsewhere.

In truth, the Annapurna region offers the richest variety of scenery in Nepal.

Its interlinking paths lead to diverse hill cultures straddling a spectacular mix of climactic zones in rapid succession. "I loved the contrast going from lush micro-systems into the mountains, then through the barren, arid landscapes close to the Tibetan plateau," says Levene.

The area hosts everything from two-day trots to month-long Tolkien-esque odysseys. Of the three major treks, we chose the Annapurna Circuit – pegged as a challenging but rewarding three-week affair with the greatest vertical net gain.

The circuit begins in a lush subtropical valley dotted with farmed terraces and surrounded by rolling mountains blanketed with coniferous forests. We passed fragrant orchards, bisected a field of trembling wild marijuana, and crossed churning white rapids on suspension bridges, pausing to cool off beneath waterfalls that chiselled deep trenches into the rock face. The landscape gradually opened up to reveal a natural canvas almost too gigantic to take in, where rock, water and vegetation competed for attention. After city life, the air was unbelievably pure, fresh and oxygenated.

We walked five to seven hours per day, stopping off to refuel and take shelter at designated teahouses in the frequent mountain villages en route. This means trekkers don't need to bring food or camping equipment. Similarly, porters and guides aren't really required on the Annapurna Circuit. "The fact that we carried our bags ourselves heightened the sense of achievement," said Alan Pretsell. "But we felt safer knowing we had a local guide with us, who cost next to nothing and was great entertainment as well."

NO QUESTION OF LUXURY

Teahouses are simple wooden constructions, offering thin mattresses, clean sheets, and blankets. Trekking is not for lovers of luxury though. "Don't expect a hot shower at the end of the day," warns Pretsell. Facilities get increasingly spartan at higher elevations. "One toilet looked like a big coffee tin with a Hessian bag for a door, which faced the Annapurna peaks," recalls Chiquita Mitchell. "A crappy bog with the best view!"

However, stopovers present valuable opportunities to mix with fellow trekkers, foreign and local – often over a restorative fix of *daal baat*, the Nepali national dish: rice with lentil soup and vegetable curry, dished up on a metallic tray. (It's a tasty meal, but after about 30 servings, "Daal baht again?" became a familiar refrain.) This can be washed down with a glass of *raksi*, the local firewater, most memorably sipped round a log-fired stove in cosy, lamp-lit teahouse kitchens.

Our teahouse encounters engendered a growing sense of trepidation about the climactic 5,416 meter (17,768 feet) Thorung La summit pass. Those who had experienced it had tales of endurance to tell, as well as noses burned red raw. DB told us that the vertiginous 1,600 meter descent would be even tougher than the 1,000 meter dawn ascent. Neither sounded like much fun. Thorung La began to loom more ominously with each passing day.

Onwards and upwards, trekking in Nepal is like stepping back in time. The trappings of the modern world vanish. On narrow sections of trail dynamited out of sheer mountain faces, we learned to stand aside for jangling, ill-mannered mule trains, led by donkeys attired in colorful woven headpieces. They

ONE TOILET LOOKED LIKE A BIG COFFEE TIN WITH A HESSIAN BAG FOR A DOOR, WHICH FACED THE ANNAPURNA PEAKS

may not wilfully attack like a demented yak, but they plough guilelessly ahead, ignoring human obstacles, sometimes trying to bustle each other off the steep sides of the path.

Most of the locals we encountered seemed genuinely pleased to see us. Will Gilroy recalls receiving enthusiastic greetings of "Namaste" (I salute you) from passing porters who were half my height, wearing old flip-flops and carrying massive cages of live chickens on their heads. Children hauled backbreaking loads that would make bodybuilders cringe. It's also humbling when a septuagenarian Nepali lady overtakes you, rock-hard calves pumping her into the distance.

Life in the unaffected, often medieval villages continues much as it must have for centuries. Some 80 percent of the population still subsists off the land. Farmers use ox-drawn ploughs. Women lay out trays of chilies to dry in the sun on the doorsteps of boxy stone houses. Firewood is stacked on flat roofs. The temple village of Muktinath, with its pagoda-style architecture, is especially picturesque.

"It was quite misty on the walk to Manang (a Tibetan-style village in the Annapurna foothills)," recalls James Levene. "We couldn't see much surrounding scenery, then it suddenly cleared and there was this enormous snow-capped mountain that looked like it was five-minutes away."

The scenery becomes so cinematic it's like taking a walking tour of National Geographic-style exotica. Easy to forget that, far from being some fabled Shangri-La, Nepal is one of the poorest per-capita countries in the world.

MOST OF THE LOCALS WE ENCOUNTERED SEEMED GENUINELY PLEASED TO SEE US. WILL GILROY RECALLS RECEIVING ENTHUSIASTIC GREETINGS OF "NAMASTE" (I SALUTE YOU) FROM PASSING PORTERS WHO WERE HALF MY HEIGHT

DAY OF RECKONING

None of us managed a wink of sleep before our day of reckoning; few do above 4,000 meters. Our shared bedroom echoed with a chorus of coughing, as the three of us struggled to catch breath. A persistent scratching sound, made by some unseen creature, hardly helped matters. The seconds ticked down to 4:30am, when we emerged, trembling and bleary, to start the trudging ascent

The first hour hurt. The climb to Thorung La is utterly unforgiving. The initial exchanges of snatched, monosyllabic quips soon gave way to staring at our feet, gasping in the thin, dry air. I paused every few meters to regulate my breathing, occasionally whispering self-pitying curses. A dull ache began to grow in the pit of my lungs. My heart-rate accelerated. I saw a Nepali porter slip into a waste-deep snowdrift, but could hardly summon the energy to acknowledge him, let alone help. "I ended up vomiting most of the way up," admits Chiquita Mitchell.

Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) can strike anyone, regardless of age, experience, or health. Most people experience mild symptoms above 4,000 meters. If they persist or worsen the only option is to descend – which usually brings immediate relief.

I started to see moving colors peeking over the brow of the cliff – and feared my head was about to implode – but, mercifully, these turned out not to be the hallucinations of advanced AMS but fluttering prayer flags marking the Thorung La pass. We triumphantly posed for photos in a spot where the surrounding mountains appeared to be at eye level or lower.

The descent presented a different kind of hell. As we edged tentatively down the steep, slushy slope, the cartilage in my knees seemed to concertina, the tendons running down my shins stiffened then went into spasms, and my digits were crushed against the toes of my boots. At the end, we were hobbling like geriatrics with hip replacements.

But as Nepalis say: "Ke garne"(what to do)? It was well worth every minute. I reckon anyone would agree. ■

WORTH NOTING

Nepal's tourism chiefs want to replace shoestring trekkers with credit-card tourists. Roads are being built through the heart of the Annapurna to facilitate theme parks and extreme sports, like heli-skiing and bungee-jumping. Claims that development is essential for the survival of Himalayan villages are rejected by the Annapurna Conservation Area Project Group, which says "although there will be some trickle down [of profits], for the majority of the local people these activities will have little effect on alleviating poverty."

ECO CONSIDERATIONS

Leave No Trace (*www.lnt.org*) principals for outdoor ethics apply. Rubbish is either packed out on foot, or ends up being dumped on the outskirts of mountain villages. Trekkers are advised to eat local food, as this helps slow deforestation (Western dishes burn four times the fuel of a serving of *dhal baat*). Try and avoid giving gifts to pestering children.

WHEN TO GO

Nepal has a monsoonal, two-season year. Spring (March to May) and Autumn (September to November) are the best times to visit. Early dry season (October to May) features some colourful festivals (like February's paint-smearing, water-squirting Holi Festival) plus good conditions. By December, tourists are flocking out like migratory birds. Mid-June to September, when the monsoon arrives, is also best avoided.

COSTS

- Trekking Registration Certificates and Annapurna Conservation Fees: US$ 35 per person
- Average cost of accommodation: about US$ 10 per room
- Meals: US$ 10-15
- Local English speaking guide: US$ 15 per day
- Porters: US$ 10 per day

Trekking Companies

Three Sisters Adventure Trekking (*www.3sistersadventure.com*)