

THE GREAT HIMALAYA TRAIL

This is as 'great' as it gets. If trails were a language this is its dictionary.

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Humla, Far-western Nepal

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Very few people have walked the length of the Himalayas in the last few decades. Either that or there is just very little documented evidence of it. However there have been some expeditions with the goal either of traversing Nepal or going further trying to traverse the greater Himalaya range.

In 1980, one 'inspirational' Mr Shirahata is mentioned in the classic book "Trekking in Nepal" by Toru Nakano as having walked the length of the country from 'east to west' in Nepal but no further references or information has been found.

In 1982, Arlene Blum with travel and adventure writer Hugh Swift became the first westerners to complete the 4,500 km great Himalayan traverse across Bhutan, Nepal and India. Starting from the eastern border of Bhutan, Swift and Blum, scaled the Himalayan range through 6000 meter mountain passes and down to river valleys at 600 meters, gaining and losing an average of 1000m each day to reach Ladakh. This is documented in her book - Breaking Trail.

In 1983 two British brothers, Richard and Adrian Crane *ran* the Himalayas from Kanchenjunga to beyond Nanga Parbat in less than 100 days!

According to the Crane's book, "Running the Himalayas",- "One rucksack, one sleeping bag, one set of clothes, one pair of shoes, and the shared items between us: map, diaries, camera, penknife, water jar and two plastic teaspoons. No guides, no porters, no shelter, no food, no water. And we would be running. Looked at logically, the idea was preposterous"

In 1980 an Indian army team set out from Arunachal Pradesh in India's north east corner, after about two years of travel along a high mountain route, they finished their journey just north of Leh in the Ladakh region of the Karakoram; it progressed in 'relay' fashion and possibly no one member stayed with the expedition for the full duration of the course.

And then there was a British Women's Trans-Himalayan Expedition who set off from Sikkim in January 1983 and used buses where possible on their journey.

Then nearly two decades later in 2003, Rosie Swale-Pope ran the length of Nepal with a support team, doing an estimated 1700 km

in 68 days to raise money for the charity Nepal Trust. Dr Gillian Holdsworth walked a similar route in 2007, documented on the British Nepal Medical Trust website.

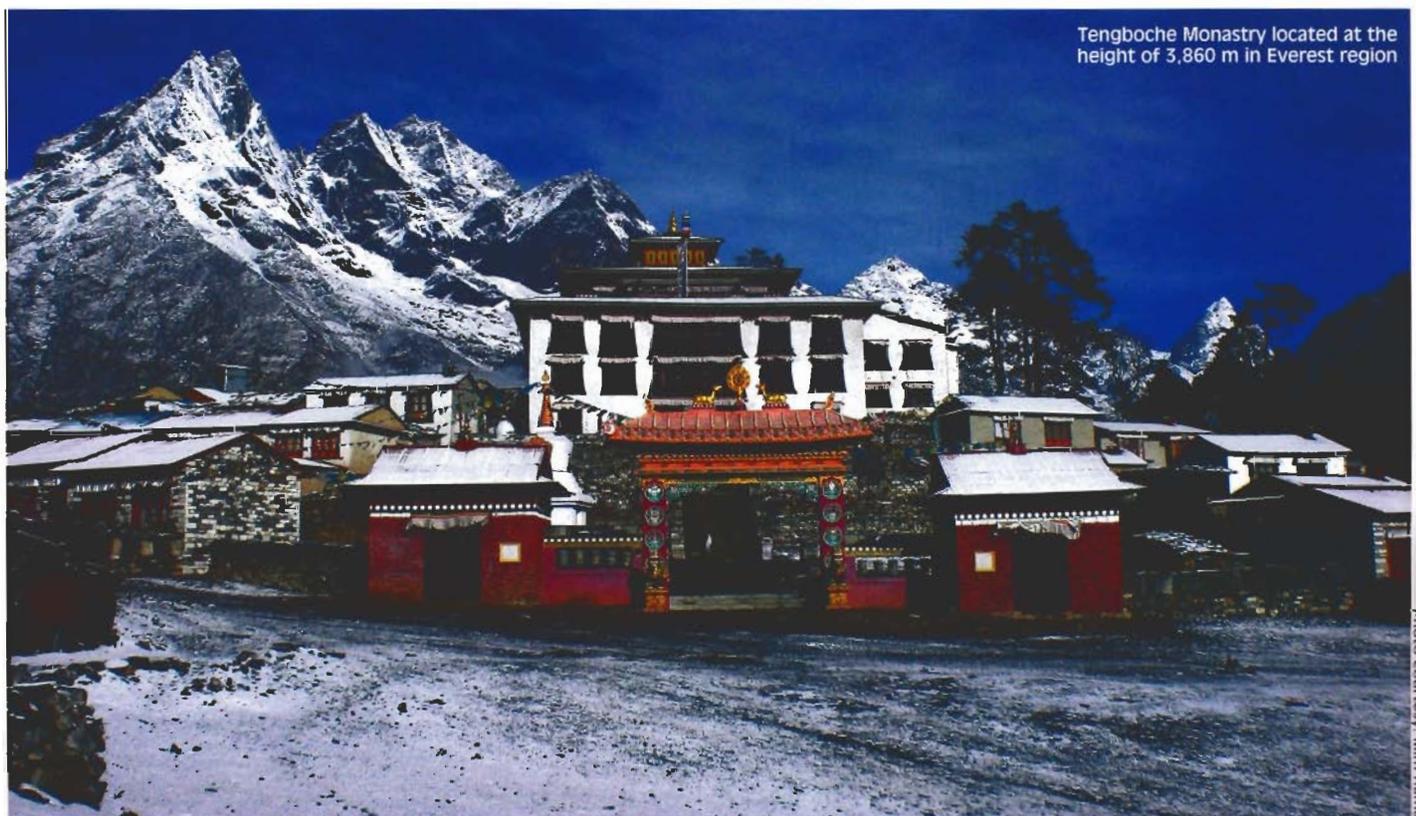
In 2008 Robin Boustead the Australian adventure traveler walked the GHT, supported by his wife Judy Smith and friends who walked the trail in stages. His objective was to identify a true high-alpine route that was feasible for trekkers. "If someone gathered enough information on that area, it would be a great trek for everyone." So that is what he did and documented his route meticulously using GPS. The route, distances, elevations, water sources, villages and camp sites are all detailed in his book "The Great Himalaya Trail: A Pictorial Guide".

And that's not all; the American adventurer Sean Burch put a Guinness world record by running the Nepal Great Himalaya Trail in just 49 days, 6 hours and 8 minutes!

So what is this trail with about 1700 kms of it in Nepal? In 2006 the Dutch development agency SNV and the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in Kathmandu proposed developing an official Great Himalaya Trail from near Kangchenjunga in the east to Api-Saipal in the far west of Nepal. The premise, if opening up wild and remote parts of the country could attract trekkers away from the busy areas like Everest, it could benefit more of the 1.8 million people living in the mountains. Their plans moved ahead and involve many who are affected by or just interested in this trail. From renowned mountaineers and trekking guides to the Nepal Tourism Board, the Trekking Agents associations to the Village Development Committees in the remote areas the trek passes through and mountain communities.

The Great Himalaya Trail is the highest and one of the longest walking trails in the world. Winding beneath the world's highest peaks and visiting some of the most remote communities on earth. It passes through lush green valleys, arid high plateaus and incredible landscapes.

Says Robin Boustead, "It is not a new trekking route - it is a new way of linking all of the trekking routes together to create Asia's first long distance walking trek"



Tengboche Monastery located at the height of 3,860 m in Everest region

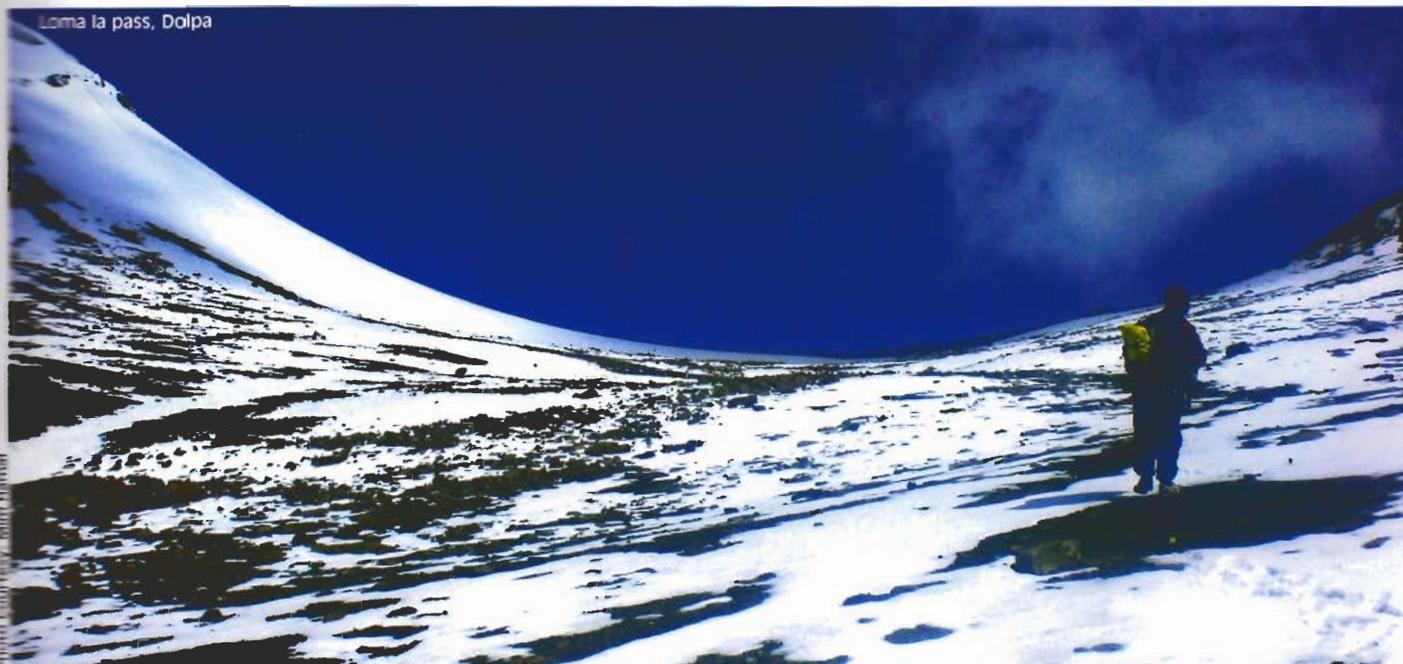
PREMISE & PURPOSE

"In collaboration with SNV, ICIMOD has been involved in the preparation of the GHT concept, which has laid the foundation for the GHT development program such as it is currently piloted in the Karmali in Nepal by SNV, with support of UNWTO and DFID. The GHT has a lot of potential, both from a development and marketing perspective. Diverting tourists away from the classic tourism destinations into remoter areas of the Himalayas, has the potential to bring socio-economic and development benefits to mountain communities in rural areas, who are often most vulnerable

in terms of poverty, climate change, and other stressors. At the moment the GHT promotion focuses on Nepal, but in order for it to have a true international appeal, its regional linkages needs to be explored and developed - which ICIMOD is happy to support. We feel that it is important to consider not only the commercial potential of developing trekking trails and routes, but also to link it with development and heritage conservation goals. The GHT concept fits very well in ICIMOD's recently developed Himalaya Heritage Routes programme, which it developed in collaboration with its

Alpine partner ViaStoria. This regional tourism programme aims to contribute to poverty reduction, sustainable development, and heritage conservation by developing and promoting regionally significant historical, cultural, religious, or natural landscape routes in the Himalaya. The GHT could be an important backbone of such a network of trails, and an iconic example of how tourism can support development in mountain regions."

Ester Kruk, Tourism Specialist.
ICIMOD



The Trail has two different routes – Higher Great Himalaya Trail rising to 5000 meters and Mid Hill Great Himalaya Trail which stays around 4700 meters.

The Great Himalaya Trail should take about 150 days to complete.

The 1700 km Nepal section of the trail begins near Kanchenjunga on the eastern border and heads west navigating the domains of eight of the world's 8000m peaks, from the beautiful but lesser-known Makalu to the famous Everest. It is not the easiest or most direct route across Nepal, rather a route through the Greater Himalaya. The Nepal section ends either in Humla on the Tibetan border or in Darchula.

The Nepal section is part of a longer alpine adventure traversing the spine of the Himalaya from Bhutan to Pakistan. Ultimately, the Great Himalaya Trail will run approximately 4,500 km in length, passing through five countries: China Bhutan, Nepal, India, and Pakistan

Part of the trail that passes through Nepal consists of 10 sections. Each section is distinct and offers incredible diversity in terms of landscapes, vegetation, wild life, people and cultures; from snow leopards to red pandas; from sub-tropical jungle to fragile high-altitude eco-systems; from the famous Sherpas to Shamanism, and the ancient Bön Buddhist culture of Dolpa.

Tourism in Nepal contributes four percent of the GDP. However this is concentrated, as far as trekking is concerned, in the 3 most popular areas of Solo Khumbu in the Everest region, the Annapurna region and Langtang attracting approximately 30000, 60000, and 10,000 trekkers respectively. By trekking away from the beaten trail, a traveler will be making a direct difference to communities in these areas spending money on food, accommodation or services such as guides, porters and cooks.

National Geographic Adventure Magazine's Jame's Vlahos observes: "Nepal's mountains are minimally developed, but they offer a wealth of trade and pilgrimage routes. The GHT elegantly connects these existing paths without blazing a single new trail."

The Great Himalaya Trail (GHT) covers 16 districts in Nepal: Darchula, Bajhang, Humla, Mugu, Jumla, Dolpa, Mustang, Manang, Gorkha, Dhading, Rasuwa, Sindhupalchok, Dolakha, Solukumbu, Sankhuwasabha and Taplejung.

Apa Sherpa – the 20 times Everest summiteers – and Dawa Steven Sherpa – another Everest summiteer – and environment activist are set to start Mid Hill Great Himalaya Trail on June 14th 2011 to promote the heroic walk of the Great Himalaya Trail. The trail's 1700 kms will take about three months to complete. This will promote the trail internationally as an iconic new trek in Nepal. ■