

# A walk through time

Angela Robertson  
UHCLIDIAN STAFF

**Thomas McCall, associate professor of literature, recently went on a 32-day adventure through the Himalayas, in a remote region of Nepal, where he scaled a 22,000 foot peak, joked with Maoist terrorists, and experienced the simple life as it has been lived for thousands of years. This is his story as retold in his own words.**

The general idea behind this trip was to see how village cultures and climates changed as one ascended from Himalayan foothills, at around 1,500 feet, to the Tibetan border at 18,000 feet, and from there up to a 22,000 foot peak.

To compare, the highest mountain in the lower 48 states is 14,500 feet, so the altitude I reached was about a mile and a half higher.

I also wanted to experience this area as authentically as possible by trekking in a remote, untouristed part of the Himalayas called the Manaslu region, which requires a special permit from the Nepali government. In fact, I did not run into one other tourist while in the Manaslu region.

Sonam, the sherpa guide, helped me to get safely past various obstacles, which at lower altitudes included dealing with aggressive mosquitoes, monkeys, and Maoist terrorists, and higher up freezing cold winds, treacherous glaciers and vertical ice walls.

We crossed over the Himalayas from north to south, following the river up the whole way. We first passed through gently undulating terraces, with wild monkeys that hang around you and chatter, and little kids asking you for pens. As you ascend it gets colder and colder, to the point where you are only warm moving or in your sleeping bag.

We followed the Dudh Kosi river for the first 10 days of the trek. I remember starting out each morning and seeing some village perched high above on the steep slopes of the river valley that leads up to the Manaslu glaciers, the eighth highest mountain in the world. By noon, that village was far below and another far above. After a few days I no longer counted villages, but valleys, one after another, endless.

The nights got colder, the forests began to thin out. Sweat froze when I stopped. The buffalo were replaced by yaks, and naks, which are the female yak, with their incredibly thick, woolly coats. The landscapes went from rich green to light brown to dazzling white with snow and ice.

It was fascinating to walk through these villages on the way up. My guide was very friendly with the villagers and knew all the languages. We were always invited to these very rustic farmhouses, where the kitchens were full of smoke, and the Tibetans sit on very hard, low benches.

I asked a few times why they made their benches so uncomfortable and they just burst out laughing because the benches were comfortable to them! You encounter a lot of "life" that is very raw and rough, like buffalo being slaughtered, which are everywhere.

It took two weeks to reach the border, where there is a glacier that separates Nepal and Tibet. We walked over the glacier for three days into the neighboring Annapurna region, which had more tourists. It was very tough; I was exhausted every day. You cannot cross the pass once the winter snows start, and we expected it to snow any day, at which point we would've had to go back the way we came.

We needed eight days to climb Chulu, a beautiful, complex mountain with four peaks; we climbed the highest peak. On the summit day, about 24 days into the trek, we got up about 2 a.m. It is not very much fun to get up so early, with barely any sleep in the freezing cold Himalayan weather.

Our base camp, where we started that morning, was at about 17,000 feet. Around dawn, we hit the summit pitch, which was unbelievably beautiful. For the next half-mile the terrain alternated like steps between almost vertical ice walls that we had to climb with ice picks and crampons, and more shallow slopes where we could walk.

After we made it to the summit, we had to come down very fast. The ice is beautiful in the morning, but what happens during the course of the day is that the sun is out; it's very cold and windy, and the ice melts and refreezes. Once this happens, the ice is like glass, very slippery, and you cannot pierce it with your crampons, so you have to make the descent quickly.

This climb was the first recorded winter ascent of Chulu, according to the Nepali Mountaineering Association. From there, a leisurely week of downhill trekking brought us back to civilization and roads at Besisahar, which is at 2,000 feet.

What impressed me along this roller-coaster hike was the variety of languages and cultures, together with what I call the "medieval" feel of the scattered villages we came across, which seemed to be exactly like they had been 1,000 years ago with similar technologies.

The area was completely remote, no roads, no telephones or electricity. They build everything themselves; their tools are even handmade. It is like going back to the Middle Ages.

We saw people with these amazing diseases that we don't normally see here, and very old people, because they tend to live to advanced years in the Himalayas, maybe because of the high altitude.

It took another seven days to get down from the peak to the roadhead at 2,000 feet, which is only a couple hundred miles from where we started. The trails are very difficult, they are never smooth and are very steep and rocky.

We passed through five different language zones, all of which my sherpa guide could speak. The climate and plant life also changed dramatically, from semi-tropical zones with balmy nights, mosquitoes, mango trees and sugar cane presses, to haunting ghost towns in higher elevations.

These were large villages with as many as 100 huts, made out of very rough timber. The inhabitants had deserted them to spend the bitterly cold winters at lower altitudes. These villages were very high up, around 10,000 to 12,000 feet, and are home to the large numbers of Tibetan refugees, called gurung, that live there during all but the coldest winter months. This was an especially cold winter because of the tsunami.

When you get to very high altitudes, you begin to have very weird thoughts and dreams in Technicolor that you would never have here, and get very emotional. You have strange dreams like the transformation of yourself into pieces of wood, or merging into the landscape.

The monasteries and other buildings

also seemed to blend into and merge with the landscape, because they were built out of the very materials that surrounded them.

I found that I even got used to the smell. We picked up a dog in a village along the way that followed us the rest of the trip. It slept with me in my tent, which made it warmer, and had a very gamey smell at first. But after a few days I found that I didn't even notice the smell anymore.

I was a bit worried about Maoist terrorists. They usually just ask for 'donations' from trekkers, about \$40 or \$50, but they dislike Americans and the British and make them turn around and go back.

We did run into some Maoists at the end of the trip when we were in the Annapurna region, so I was able to just pay them about \$46 dollars. They gave me a receipt so if I met another group I could show that I had already paid. They walked with us for awhile on friendly terms after I paid and we joked around.

I went on this journey because I wanted to get out of the cocoon of modern society and do something different. While climbing in these conditions, you're suffering in a way, but the things you see are worth the effort. I would be toiling uphill through a forest for hours and then suddenly the forest stops and you're looking at an incredible vista with jagged peaks and a river 2,000 feet below where you had been the day before.

Along the trails are piles of stones carved with mantras that give blessings to the travelers and show devotion. The Himalayas are a very spiritual place and many people, of different religions, go to do pilgrimages.

I consider myself very lucky to have a glimpse into the way life has been for thousands of years. It is a very rare experience.

OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Donkeys serve as a major mode of transportation. Here they cross a suspension bridge in the Himalayas.

A Tibetan woman in Sonagaon weaves on her handmade loom.

The view up the Himalayas from one of the base camps with the tent in the foreground.

The Himalayas serve as a scenic backdrop for a Tibetan pagoda.

Arka, a "Tibetan friend" wears the typical dress of the region.

## A professor's eye-opening journey through Nepal...

Photos by Tom McCall

Design by Jessica Sonntag





