

Annapurna Region

HIGHLIGHTS

- Walking completely around the Annapurna massif in 16 to 21 days, crossing the 5416m **Thorung La** (p186)
- Watching the golden dawn light inch down the frozen fluted panorama of peaks from the **Annapurna Sanctuary** (p165)
- Savouring the breakfast views of Annapurna and Machhapuchhare from the traditional Gurung village of **Ghandruk** (p167)
- Exploring the *chortens*, forts and shrines of pristine Trans-Himalayan villages such as **Marpha** (p193), **Jharkot** (p189) and **Kagbeni** (p190) in the Kali Gandaki Valley, or **Bragha** (p179) in the Manang Valley
- Acclimatising in style on spectacular side trips to holy **Milarepa's Cave** (p180) or scenic **Ice Lake** (p181), just outside Manang
- Admiring the perfect views of Annapurna II and IV over a teahouse lunch in **Ngawal** (p179) or **Ghyaru** (p179), on the high route from Pisang
- Teaming up with other trekkers for the challenging three-day excursion to high-altitude **Tilicho Tal** (p182)

With over 60,000 visitors a year, the Annapurna Himal has long been the most popular region amongst trekkers, and for good reason. The mountain views are flawless, the variety of scenery is hard to match and the villages and monasteries you pass offer an exotic slice of Nepali, Tibetan and Trans-Himalayan culture. You'll be on the trail within an hour of leaving Pokhara and you can count on excellent food and accommodation whenever you need it.

The Annapurna Circuit has long been considered one of the world's great treks. Like all great journeys, the trek reveals itself gradually, climbing through subtropical scenery to a Tibetan-influenced valley and then over the high Thorung La to the Kali Gandaki Valley, a desert-like Trans-Himalayan region that was once a vital trade corridor to Tibet. The side trips that line the circuit rank among Nepal's most spectacular, so this is one trek not to rush.

The Annapurna Sanctuary is a shorter trek that leads through foothill towns and up the gorge of the Modi Khola into a magnificent mountain amphitheatre. Pokhara is a good starting place for a number of shorter treks that visit the lovely Gurung village of Ghandruk. The Annapurnas are also the launching pad for adventurous treks into the restricted areas of Lo (Mustang; p296) and Nar-Phu (p310).

The Annapurna region is changing, fast. Roads are inching up both sides of the circuit, especially the Jomsom side (now linked by road to Pokhara). Avoiding the road and all it brings with it involves a few detours, but don't worry, the scenery is still magnificent, and in many cases the detours are even better than the original trail.



ENVIRONMENT

The Annapurna Conservation Area embraces the entire Annapurna Himal. From valley floor (below 1000m) to the summit of Annapurna (8091m) there is an amazing variety of habitats.

Trails along the lower valleys usually weave through fields, dipping occasionally into the remaining shady broadleaf forests. Upstream, you enter spectacular rhododendron forests, their gnarled pinkish limbs festooned with epiphytic ferns and orchids. Spring brings spectacular blooms, from red to pink to white, depending on altitude.

Insects abound in the steamy low valleys. Many vibrant species of butterfly display their colours in the heat of the day, regularly alighting in your path to drink

the seepage from the trail. Keep an eye out at watercourses for a number of small but striking birds, including the white-capped river chat and the plumbeous redstart. The brown dipper may be spotted by the water's edge, and watch for a flash of turquoise as a white-breasted kingfisher takes flight. The plump, white-breasted dipper is found west of the Kali Gandaki. The inquisitive, cinnamon-coloured hoopoe favours open, cultivated land and villages.

In the sky, the raptors, or birds of prey, are most likely to catch your eye. Of particular note are the large, soaring raptors that ride the thermals effortlessly for hours, such as the Himalayan griffon and lammergeier. Other raptors are known to migrate in large numbers along the Kali Gandaki Valley.

