

Langtang & Helambu

HIGHLIGHTS

- Trekking past bamboo groves, monsoon wildflowers or springtime rhododendron blooms on the **Langtang Valley** trek (p211)
- Hiking through Swiss-style alpine pastures to the foot of huge glaciers at **Langshisha Kharka** (p215)
- Savouring a hot cinnamon roll or an alfresco plate of 'nak' cheese while admiring the views of 7246m Langtang Lirung at **Kyanjin Gompa** (p213)
- Climbing to the viewpoints atop **Kyanjin Ri** (p214) or **Tsergo Ri** (p214) for a spectacular day hike from Kyanjin Gompa
- Gazing down on the holy lakes of **Gosainkund** (p221), as a 150km line of Himalayan peaks frames the horizon behind

The mountains north of Kathmandu offer a great range of trekking choices, all within a day's drive of the capital. The major areas are the Langtang Valley, the sacred alpine lakes of Gosainkund and the rolling Sherpa farmland of Helambu, and these can be combined in many different ways to make a trek lasting from seven to 16 days.

The Langtang Valley trek follows the river upstream through forests of pine, bamboo and rhododendron, ascending through pastures to arrive at the alpine meadows of Kyanjin Gompa, where you'll get outstanding mountain views just a stone's throw from the Tibetan border.

The Gosainkund trek climbs more steeply through farmland and above the treeline up an alpine ridge that offers a huge Himalayan panorama, to reach a rocky bowl studded with sacred high-altitude lakes. From Gosainkund you can continue over the high Laurebina La and walk all the way back to the Kathmandu Valley, offering a satisfying sense of journey.

Helambu lacks the mountain views of Langtang and Gosainkund but offers a closer look at village life and is a fine winter or cultural trek. None of the treks are particularly easy, with a surprising amount of steep climbs and stiff descents, often through deep forests or across glacial moraines.

The good news is that Langtang and Helambu are logistically easy – no special permits, few altitude hassles, decent teahouses and no flights, just long bus rides. If you only have a week or are looking for a teahouse trek away from the crowds of the Annapurna and Everest regions, they're excellent choices.



ENVIRONMENT

Much of this region falls into Langtang National Park and, away from the larger settlements, there is a surprising amount of old-growth forest: chir pine, rhododendron and alder. Magnificent old rhododendrons grace the trail between Tharepati and Malemchigaon on the upper Helambu trek. The larch of the Langtang region is unusual among conifers in that it is deciduous, lending the forest an unmistakable yellow hue during autumn.

In order to really experience the full breadth of wildflowers, you must endure the monsoon rains. There are, however, some species that bloom at other times of the year, such as the sky-blue gentians of the dry subalpine and alpine regions and

the lavender primulas, or primroses, of moist areas. The varieties of epiphytic orchids that adorn the wet forests also flower at various times of the year.

In Langtang watch for hawks or buzzards, medium-sized raptors with broad wings and rounded, often fanned, tails. Though there are only three species, their highly variable plumage makes identification difficult. They are highly visible during winter and likely to be seen in pairs, mostly below 3000m.

Birds you will hear more than see include usually drab-coloured cuckoos; plump, green, fruit-eating barbets; and, at nightfall, various owls, owlets and nightjars, which are similar to the North American night-hawks. The laughing thrushes are another group of birds that usually betray their

