

Western Nepal

HIGHLIGHTS

- o Enjoying a day off by the meditative turquoise waters of **Phoksumdo Lake** (p281), Nepal's deepest and most beautiful lake
- o Trekking through deep forests to the tranquil beauty of **Rara Lake** (p266), for a rare taste of a Nepali wilderness
- o Exploring the Bön monasteries of the upper **Tarap Valley** (p284), with its yak caravans and villages straight out of the film *Caravan*
- o Making your own inner journey in the footsteps of Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* on the ever-changing **Beni to Dolpo trek** (p287)
- o Pitching your tent in the achingly beautiful wilderness between the Baga La and Numa La on the **Phoksumdo Lake via Do Tarap trek** (p286)

With language and traditions quite different from the rest of the country, western Nepal feels in many ways like a land apart. The landscapes here are huge, broken only by the massive snowcapped peaks of Api Saipal, Kanjiroba and Dhaulagiri, as dry waves of khaki-coloured ridges spread through the Trans-Himalaya as far as the eye can see. The region hides some of the country's best trekking secrets, including spectacular turquoise lakes, timeless Tibetan monasteries and spectacular high passes. Approaches from the south ascend from the Hindu lowlands through deep gorges or over high passes into the remote arid landscapes of Do Tarap and outer Dolpo.

Treks in Nepal's Wild West are seriously off the beaten track – there are no teahouse treks or warm slices of apple pie here. If you're not put off by the logistical difficulties of securing flights, fuel, permits and food, or the relatively higher costs of trekking far from Kathmandu, then the west might be the place for you. This is one corner of Nepal where you need a reliable trekking agency on your side. A heartland of the Maoist rebellion for the last decade, the west is now safe and ready again for intrepid visitors.

Many of the trails in the west continue to the northern side of the Himalayan ranges of Nampa, Saipal and Kanjiroba, making it easy for trekkers to hike along river valleys and into Tibet – a practice the governments of both Nepal and China would like to discourage. Treks into the border regions of inner Dolpo and to the far northwestern district of Humla are described in the Restricted Areas chapter.



ENVIRONMENT

Western Nepal, particularly the Dolpo area, is reminiscent of Kashmir in its rich variety of flora. To witness the full spectrum of wildflowers, the time to visit is July and August. From Jumla east one may recognise ground orchids, edelweiss, corydalis, campanulas, anemones, forget-me-nots, impatiens and roses. Higher up in the alpine areas, larkspurs, geraniums, poppies, sedums and saxifrages proliferate.

Look for flocks of swift-flying snow pigeons and gliding pairs of Himalayan griffons. Within the forests along the trek to Rara Lake it is entirely possible to catch sight of Nepal's national bird, the impeyan pheasant.

Excellent places to spot blue sheep include the Kagmara La trek, the Tarap Valley and the high ground between Dhorpatan and Dunai. Your chance of sighting a snow leopard is best in sparsely populated upper Dolpo, for example around Shey Gumpa, though realistically, you are about as likely to spot a snow leopard as you are a yeti.

The jackal, found up to 3700m, is a carnivore you may come across, or at least hear, in the west. This member of the dog family, often a timid scavenger, has a sustained, macabre howl, which is heard after dark.

HISTORY

Western Nepal was once the centre of a large empire that extended north into Ngari (western Tibet) and west to Kumaon (India). Much of western Nepal was part of the ancient Tibetan Zhang Zhung kingdom, whose legacy is visible in the region's scattering of Bön monasteries. Tibetan peoples migrated into Dolpo and Humla during the 6th and 8th centuries when Zhang Zhung was conquered by central Tibet. Until Jumla was conquered by the army of Bahadur Shah in 1788, the people of western Nepal had very little to do with Kathmandu.

Sandwiched between the more powerful kingdoms of Lo and Jumla, Dolpo has always been too rugged, remote and sparsely populated to be a major player. The Tibetan kingdom of Purang nominally controlled Dolpo between the 9th and 14th centuries, followed by Mustang, to which it was forced to pay an annual tribute. When Mustang became part of the Gorkha kingdom in 1789, Dolpo followed it by default into the Nepal

political sphere. A greater change came to Dolpo in the 1960s, when the Chinese closure of the Tibetan border cut the region's traditional trading and herding routes.

In contrast to the Tibetan Buddhist borderlands, the lowlands of western Nepal are predominantly Hindu. The major legacy of western Nepal's Malla kingdom, based at capitals at Sinja and Dulla, is its language Khasa, which remains the basis of modern Nepali.

The Chhetris of western Nepal are categorised into three groups: Thakuris, who are the aristocracy; normal Chhetris as found throughout Nepal; and Matwali Chhetris ('those who drink liquor'). The status of Matwali Chhetris is interesting because many of them are Tibetan immigrants who long ago masqueraded as Chhetris, evolving over the centuries their own combination of Hinduism and Buddhism.

INFORMATION

When to Trek

Most of western Nepal is either outside the monsoon's influence or in the rain shadow of the Dhaulagiri Himal. Summers (June to August) tend to be drier here than in the rest of Nepal and there are few leeches. The trekking season, therefore, is from late spring and throughout summer until late October, though the best time to visit the high valleys is from late August to September, when the wildflowers are in bloom. Snow blocks passes in winters and many higher villages are deserted. One problem with summer treks in the west is the inordinate number of flies that gather on food and inside tents.

Emergency Facilities

Western Nepal is remote and lacking in both communication and medical facilities. There are telephones in the district headquarters towns of Simikot, Dunai and Jumla, and satellite phone links in Ringmo (Phoksumdo Lake).

Maps

Most trekkers will be happy with the Himalayan Maphouse/Nepa Maps 1:125,000 map *Upper and Lower Dolpa*, which covers everything from Kagmara La to Kagbeni.

An excellent and detailed map for the Rara Lake trek is the Nelles/Schneider 1:100,000 *Jumla-Rara Lake*, or try the hard-

