

# Nepal's best trek

In the 100th edition of *Adventure Travel*, Nepal's tough yet spectacular Dhaulagiri Circuit was named our number one trek in the world. **John Hayes** couldn't resist the challenge, but does he think we got it right? Read on to find out...



It's a personal weakness but I'm a sucker for recommendations. I booked a trip to Kanchenjunga after seeing a claim that its base camp is the most beautiful campsite in the world, and I did something similar with Mera Peak after reading that it provides the best mountain landscape a trekker will ever experience. Once I saw that the Dhaulagiri Circuit was number one in *Adventure Travel's* top 100 treks I was caught – hook, line and sinker!

Despite the claim, and despite five previous trekking visits to Nepal, I didn't know anything about the Dhaulagiri Circuit before reading the article in the 100th edition of *Adventure Travel* in 2012. I'd seen the beautiful great white mountain that is Dhaulagiri on a trip around the Annapurnas, and I knew that it's the world's seventh highest peak, but I had not logged the fact that you can trek

round it. Perhaps it's less popular than other Nepalese treks as it is that bit tougher (some even argue that it is the toughest three-week trek going).

The Dhaulagiri Circuit has all the features of a classic trek in Nepal. Its standard itinerary consists of 13 trekking days, including two acclimatisation days and provision for contingency. Transit to and from the trek typically adds another week to the total time. Like the Annapurna Circuit the route starts low (1,200m) and heads up a valley, which it doesn't leave until it crosses the French Col at 5,400m into the Hidden Valley. At this point most people grab the chance of bagging a 6,000m peak and climb Dhampus Peak (6,060m) before the final knee-crunching 2,000m descent to Marpha where it joins the Annapurna Circuit.

Having done it, what do I think about the number one ranking by *Adventure* ➤

6 In one trip the Dhaulagiri Circuit combines everything that makes trekking in Nepal so special 9

Clockwise from top right: Local girls at Darbang; Avalanche on the Chhonbardan Glacier; On an acclimatisation walk at Italian Base Camp



Photo: Andy Twigg

Who's writing



After a working life as a management consultant, **John Hayes**, 58, now spends his life walking and writing about it. In 2011 he became the first person to finish the E4 long-distance trail from Tarifa in Spain to Budapest, a six-month 5,000km trip. John blogs about his trips at [www.johnhayeswalks.com](http://www.johnhayeswalks.com) and is currently working on his first guidebook for Cicerone – the GR1 Sendero Histórico in Spain.



Photo: Andy Twigg



☉ Dhampus Peak is conveniently just 60 meters over 6,000m – perfect if, like me, you spend your life trying to beat self-inflicted targets ☺

*Travel?* Well, it's impossible for one person to judge 100 treks (although I have done 20 of the top 100) but I can understand how the conclusion was reached. It's certainly the best of the six treks I've done in Nepal. Why do I think it's so good? I guess it's because in one trip it combines everything that makes trekking in Nepal so special.

First, it's a full-blown expedition resembling the trips made by early pioneers as they opened up the Himalayas in the 1950s. It has the classic start, deep down in the farming villages of the Himalayan foothills – terraced hillsides and children everywhere – and then climbs through a series of climate zones into an

increasingly empty landscape.

Second, it's a 'long burn' with tempting views of the Dhaulagiri Massif kicking in early on day two, when you're still low down among the farmers, and getting ever more dramatic as you climb up. Just when you think you have seen the best thing ever you see something else that tops it.

Third, it takes you into a landscape as remote and wild as it is beautiful. You can argue about Kanchenjunga Base Camp North versus Dhaulagiri Base Camp for the title of most beautiful campsite in the world. But with Kanchenjunga you turn round and retrace your steps back down the valley once you've 'done it.' With Dhaulagiri

the scenic fireworks continue to explode after the base camp with more amazing places to visit: French Col, the Hidden Valley and Dhampus Peak.

Fourth, the trip has a genuine summit – a challenge that is both intimidating in terms of anticipation and enormously satisfying if you manage to conquer it. Actually with Dhaulagiri you get two summits: French Col, 5,400m, the high point of the circuit itself, and Dhampus Peak which is conveniently just 60 meters over 6,000m – perfect if, like me, you spend your life trying to beat self-inflicted targets. The summit challenge takes place towards the end of the trek avoiding the anti-climax that can be



Big scenery: leaving Italian Base Camp



Sunny spot: a crowded Chhonbardan Glacier Camp

Photo: Andy Twigg

experienced when the highlight of the trip is in the middle.

Finally, like all the great trips to Nepal, it's a true adventure. It takes you to places beyond the imagination of most folks back home, forces you to confront your own physical and mental limitations, and hits you with the unexpected. And if, like me, you have seen the best of your 50s then it is simply life affirming and feeds an appetite to do more.

Of course a trip like this is not all plain sailing. We had bad weather at the beginning and were met, as we went up, with a stream of trekkers coming the other way. Some had been stranded higher up for days and had eventually turned round. There was a lot more snow on the route than 'normal' and it seemed unlikely that we would complete the circuit. With the prospect of turning round and returning the way we had come, and a cold tent full of damp gear, for a time it was falling well ➤

#### 4 THINGS YOU PROBABLY DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT DHAULAGIRI

- 1 Known as the White Mountain, at 8,167m, Dhaulagiri is the seventh-highest peak in the world.
- 2 Dhaulagiri was first climbed in 1960, by four members of a Swiss Austrian team and two Sherpas.
- 3 Sixty-nine climbers have died on Dhaulagiri's slopes, including 10 members of an 11-strong American team in 1969. At the time it was the worst ever Nepalese climbing disaster.
- 4 The highest point on the Dhaulagiri Circuit is the French Col at 5,400m. It gets its name from a 1950 expedition that arrived there via the Hidden Valley before turning back and climbing Annapurna instead of Dhaulagiri. The expedition was the first to summit an 8,000m peak.



Woman power: bringing in the harvest

short of its best trek billing.

Perversely the bad weather made the good weather feel even better when it arrived. We ended up with a perfect six-day window of blue, cloudless skies to complete the final part of the trip. The weather wasn't just good, it was fantastic. There was still more snow than normal, which made for a harder climb, but fresh snow only added to what was truly awesome scenery.

The Dhaulagiri Circuit does have a reputation for bad weather but I'm struggling to establish if it's justified. Our Nepalese guide had done it eight times and had only once been forced by the weather to miss out on Dhampus Peak. I suspect what is actually the case is that the consequences of bad weather are more dangerous on this circuit than on some other treks because it's high and remote.

So, could you do it? The reputation the trek has can be a bit intimidating.

My nerves weren't helped by the list of gear I was expected to take. This trek attracted more climbers than any treks I've done in the past – I've done a lot of high-altitude trekking but I'm not a climber – but reassuringly for me, when we all met in the bar at Heathrow airport, I was not the only person with an excessive amount of grey hair.

The group consisted of 10 men and two women. Two were the wrong side of 60, six were in their 50s, two in their 40s and there was a couple in their 30s. I've never had a bad trekking group, but you always have

☪ Just when you think you have seen the best thing ever you see something else that tops it ☪

more fun when everyone gels, like we did. We all got round the circuit although one of the guys found it particularly tough and suffered from a bad cold and food poisoning. Eight of us made it to the top of Dhampus, and interestingly the four that didn't were the youngest members of the party.

We had two doctors in the group and getting an instant explanation of the impact of the conditions on your body was interesting, if not a little scary. I'm definitely not designed to travel from the seafront in Brighton to 5,000m on a glacier within a two-week period, but previous experience helped. This time I took a really good sleeping bag – definitely not ➤

## 3 EASIER TREKS IN NEPAL

Never trekked in the Himalaya before? Here are some terrific options for first-timers

### 1 Manaslu Circuit

This is being billed as the 'new' Annapurna Circuit, as a road has changed the Annapurna trek. The three-week trek around Manaslu, the world's eighth highest mountain, is on terrain that isn't difficult, but challenges come from its length and altitude. The rewards are stunning views of Himalayan giants on the Nepal/Tibet border, and a varied route through villages, past Buddhist monasteries and over high passes. Look out for a full article on the Manaslu Circuit in the next edition of *Adventure Travel*.



The Manaslu Massif

### 2 Langtang Valley

To the north of Kathmandu, on the border with Tibet, the Langtang Valley, or 'valley of the glaciers,' sees fewer visitors than many of Nepal's trekking areas, yet it's also easier to reach: you don't need to take an internal flight from the capital to get there. A trek here will combine wildlife, traditional culture and classic mountain views of 6,000m and 7,000m peaks, including the mighty Langtang Lirung (7,246m). You'll pass the holy lake at Gosainkund too, and the trekking experience will be amplified by the absence of other tourists.



The Langtang Valley

### 3 Everest Base Camp

This is the classic. The Khumbu region of Nepal is not only home to the highest mountain in the world, but seven more giants over 8,000m too. The standard trek to Everest Base Camp involves about 12 days of hiking, reaching a high point of almost 5,550m, with spectacular views along the way. Or you can make it longer, either starting at Jiri, where the Everest expeditions of the 1950s began, or taking a circular route via the Gokyo Lakes and over the Cho La Pass. Whichever you choose will be astounding.

## FIND IT



## LET'S GO

Want to do what John did? Here's how you can...

### Getting there

A Dhaulagiri Circuit trip starts from Kathmandu followed by an internal flight to Pokara and a bus trip to Darbang. The return involves two flights, from Jonsom to Pokara and from Pokara back to Kathmandu. However, the weather at the beginning and end of my trip meant all the internal flights were cancelled and the journey was completed by bus. This was a shame because the bus journeys are slow, dangerous and uncomfortable and the flight from Jonsom is supposed to be spectacular.

Direct flights from the UK to Kathmandu don't exist but various airlines fly there with just one change. A daytime change at the new airport at Dehli seems to be the preferred option with most operators. The Saturday night Jet Airways ([www.jetairways.com](http://www.jetairways.com)) flight out of London has become a trekker's special.

### When to go

Nepal has two walking seasons: October/November and March/April. There are pros and cons for both. In October/November it's usually clearer but colder (particularly in November), and in March/April it's warmer but with more cloud. April is closer to the Dhaulagiri climbing season so if you go then you should see expeditions preparing to summit at the base camps.

### What to take

The route is not technically difficult and recent improvements carried out by the Nepalese army have made some of the most exposed paths safer, but a certain amount of technical gear is required just in case. Conditions on my trip meant that I didn't need the crampons, harness, karabiners and prussic loop but, with the deep snow, the plastic boots were essential. I also got to use an ice axe on the climb up Dhampus – my first and possibly last experience with one – and I was impressed with the effect. You also need a helmet as there are stretches of path that get bombarded with stones as the frozen moraine melts in the mid-day sun.

Keeping warm is key to an enjoyable trip and given the amount of time you spend in a tent, you can't afford to skimp on a sleeping bag. I have learnt from very cold experiences that you get what you pay for with sleeping bags and that not all four-season bags are the same. It's also the case, acknowledged by the recommendations you see on some of the labels, that women feel the cold more than men and need bags with higher insulation values.

Unlike on treks around the Khumbu valley, such as Everest Base Camp, the meals on the Dhaulagiri Circuit are consumed inside a mess tent rather than the shelter of a teahouse. Although a Nepalese teahouse at altitude is not necessarily warm (the Nepalese don't appreciate the thermal advantages of shutting doors), they beat a mess tent, especially if a yak dung fire has been lit. So like the sleeping bag, a decent down jacket is also a must.

Jagged Globe and other operators will provide a kit list and a hire service. Perhaps my only grumble with Jagged Globe is that I had to hire kit in the UK, get it delivered, carry it to Heathrow and then send it back to them on my return. Given the size of some of the items (the plastic boots are enormous) this is a major challenge and it would be easier if, like some other operators, it provided the service from Kathmandu. Kathmandu, time permitting, has everything a trekker needs, although the origin of some of the items is questionable. There are also shops where gear can be hired (try Shona's in Thamel near the famous Kilroy restaurant), although in return for convenience and a low price expect to find the kit showing signs of extensive previous use.

### Experience

Although the Dhaulagiri Circuit is suitable for anyone who's fit and happy to cope with uncertainty and adventure, I do think that a bit of experience helps and I wouldn't recommend Dhaulagiri as a first trip at altitude. Plus it's so good that the other great Nepalese trips might be a bit of an anti-climax if you do Dhaulagiri first!

### Cost and operators

My trip was with Jagged Globe and the price, including flight, was £2,495 ([www.jagged-globe.co.uk](http://www.jagged-globe.co.uk)). Other UK-based operators running the trek include KE Adventure Travel ([www.keadventure.com](http://www.keadventure.com)) and The Mountain Company ([www.themountaincompany.co.uk](http://www.themountaincompany.co.uk)), although these don't include the Dhampus Peak option. All trips to Nepal are 'fulfilled' by a local Nepalese company and an experienced traveller could book direct with one of these companies. Most companies include a European guide although Jagged Globe also provides the option of a 'self-guided' trip where the trekker assembles the party (a couple or a group of friends) and Jagged Globe book all the local services (porters, cooks and sherpas).

something you should skimp on – and for the first time I took Diamox. This might make some purists frown, but I slept much better and in particular didn't suffer from Cheyne–Stokes respiration (when your body forgets how to breathe) in the way I had on previous trips. Interestingly both doctors, veterans of high altitude trips, also took it.

I went with Sheffield-based Jagged Globe, a new company for me, and was impressed. Its attention to detail was particularly reassuring – checking my insurance and making sure I had the right gear – which I guess reflects the risk it associates with this trek.



The White Mountain:  
Dhaulagiri (8,167m)

Photo: Andy Twigg

The trip is given the toughest grade in the company's three-grade trekking classification system. Also key to the success of a trip like this is the quality of the local partner. Jagged Globe has a long relationship with Summit Trekking (a company with Dutch origins that also owns the Summit Hotel in Kathmandu, probably the best hotel there), and the quality of the crew was excellent. I was impressed by the speed with which a helicopter was called in to take a sick porter out from the Hidden Valley campsite. You can't mess about with things like this.

I can't say whether or not the Dhaulagiri Circuit deserves a number one accolade, but if you've already walked the better-known Nepalese classics and want to challenge yourself just that bit more, you should definitely do it. **AT**