
KEV REYNOLDS

Nepal's Farthest West

(Plate 42)

In Nepal one can live off the country in a sombre fashion,
but it is no place in which to make a gastronomic tour.

H W Tilman

On the final pass of our epic traverse of the hidden land of Dolpo late in 1995, I sat hunched against the wind gazing west across a maze of folding blue ridges and hinted valleys to a block of snow and ice that seemed suspended in the sky. It appeared to have no connection whatever with the earth, but hung there in the distance, a misty veil between skybound glacier and blue foothill, a mountain divorced from its roots.

'What's that?' I gasped.

Kirken tapped the side of his nose and let his voice drop to a whisper, as though afraid someone would overhear. 'Saipal,' he said. Then, breathless with anticipation, 'I need to go there.'

It was the way he spoke of his need to go there that caught my imagination. It was not simply a desire, a vague wish or a dream, but an urgent, desperate craving, as though he had a duty to fulfil. No, not a duty, it was more personal than that; more a necessity to see yet another part of this globe-trotting Sherpa's own country, before it was altered for all time by the incipient tide of change led by the outside world's sometimes questionable aid programmes.

On that November pass, with frost-nip in the air, a dream was born. From my dream and Kirken's need, plans took shape so that 16 months and a clutch of faxes later, he and I, plus five of his lads who had opted to join us as porters, spilled from an overcrowded Third World bus at the roadhead of Gukuleswar, 10km from the Indian border, and wondered what madness had taken hold of the land.

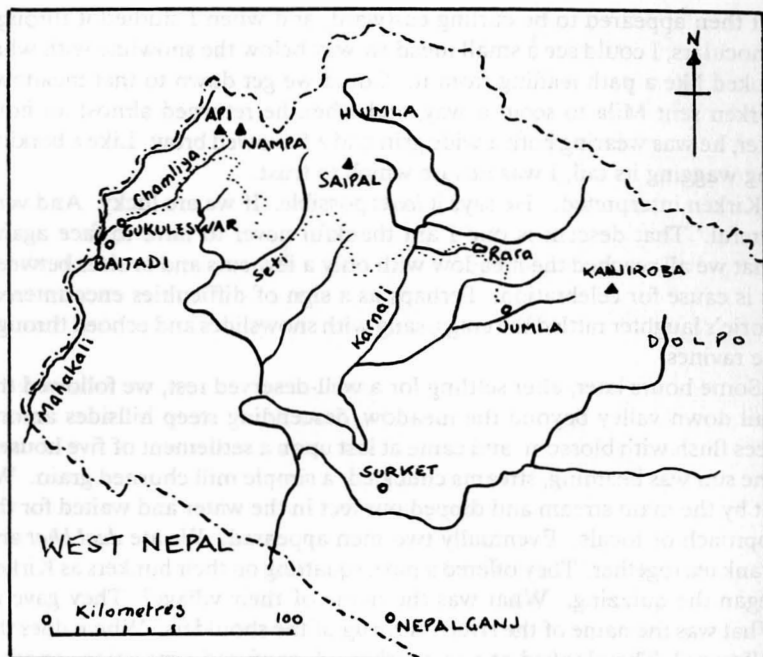
Wherever we looked smoke rose from cooking fires; there were tents and awnings and a bustling, jostling, good-natured gaggle of brilliant saris and dazzling teeth, a cacophonous swell of laughter and chatter, of bells and trumpets and belching buffalo, of shrill cries and raucous greetings hurled against a background of rushing water, as the Chamliya River surged over a makeshift causeway destined not to last the day. We had arrived in the high fever of a major Hindu festival and it seemed every son and daughter of the Far West had converged on Gukuleswar to celebrate. Clearly this

was no place in which to unwind from three days and nights of travel on broken roads before heading for the high country and our vague eastward traverse. When I gazed over five thousand bobbing heads to the northeast, wild-looking hills rose to unseen mountains that had thrilled me at daybreak that morning when we had lurched over yet another foothill ridge.

A week later we cowered at the foot of unseen Api with clouds at shoulder-height and snow drifting round us. Five splendid days of trekking had brought us to this rarely visited corner of the Himalaya where Nepal, India and Tibet converge at unmarked borders. It had been unbearably hot down at Gukuleswar, but up here things were different. Avalanches boomed through the swirl of twilit midday and a blast of arctic wind bent our resolve. Over a communal pot of garlic soup and a chunk of fruit cake from home, we altered our plan. Instead of trying to link the glaciers that swirled from Api, Nampa and the 'big' 6000m peaks that spread east to Saipal, we would concede to the prevailing conditions and cross a little south of the main block. Personally that suited me fine, for we would now be touching base every few days with remote settlements in isolated valleys. I had long ago realised that mixing with the people of Nepal gives as much lasting pleasure as the mountains themselves.

So we backtracked for two days, crossed and recrossed the extraordinary gorge of the Chamliya River to its eastern side and found ourselves in a village at about 3000m stuffing between us 8 kilos of potatoes and 18 boiled eggs in the midst of a group of snotty-nosed toddlers who hacked and coughed and sneezed with generous distribution. To the north, Api's unmistakable signature blazed white above the valley clouds. Local men turned the soil with wooden ploughs. Behind them children threw down handfuls of manure, while women pressed potatoes into the dung for a summer crop. The last harvest had been a good one, hence the feast of rapidly dwindling food spread before us, and it presented vain hope that such would be the case throughout our traverse.

As a sirdar and trekking agent Kirken has organised some outstanding treks off the beaten track. He is a man whose judgement I trust completely, and after listening to him grilling the village elders with regard to a possible onward route, I took it for granted that he understood all the directions offered in this curious dialect. Perhaps it was the directions that were misleading, the unwise wisdom of people who didn't really know but who were reluctant to admit it. Whatever the reason, my confidence began to wane as a couple of hours later we were plunging down a near-vertical jungle into a ravine barely twenty paces wide in its bed, then attempting to scramble up the other side, using rhododendron roots as handholds and hauling each other through tangles of vegetation. Thinking all would be well when at last we emerged from the jungle, we were dismayed as snow began to fall from a leaden sky, but at least the gradient eased as I suddenly ploughed ahead in excitement on discovering what appeared to be a vague trail, or trough, through a snowfield.



The trail led on a meandering course, topped a crest and bore left. Light was fading fast now and the snow falling heavier than before. There was no indication of what lay ahead, behind or below. Our world shrank to a few paces, but I pushed on anyway, afraid that if we stopped now the meandering course of the trail would disappear in the snow and we would be stuck. Then Kirken's voice called me back. Of course, he was right. It was too dangerous to continue, it would be completely dark in half-an-hour and our best bet was to return to the crest and dig our tents into the snowfield on the other side.

It continued to snow throughout the night, and although it had eased when day broke, we were snug within a blanket of cloud and visibility was down to a few metres. The boys were unconcerned and waves of laughter rose and fell from their crowded shelter. In recollection it was the sound of their laughter that accompanied every tricky moment, every dangerous situation, and every joyous hour upon the trail.

When the cloud lifted we scanned the far side of the ridge which plummeted into a savage glen. There was no sign of the trail we had followed yesterday, and I offered a silent prayer of thanks that we had stopped when we did. To have continued looked now to have been a suicidal option. Yet where were we to go? The map, which had unaccountably mislaid a couple of 6000m peaks, did not bother to include the valley spread before us. I checked with the compass. That valley was flowing roughly south,

but then appeared to be curling eastward, and when I studied it through binoculars, I could see a small meadow way below the snowline with what looked like a path leading from it. Could we get down to that meadow? Kirken sent Mila to scout a way, and when he returned almost an hour later, he was wearing both a wide grin and a furrowed brow. Like a barking dog wagging its tail, I was unsure which to trust.

Kirken interpreted. 'He says it *looks* possible. If we are lucky. And very careful.' That descent is one I am thankful never to have to face again. That we all reached the meadow with only a few cuts and bruises between us is cause for celebration. Perhaps as a sign of difficulties encountered, Dorje's laughter rattled the crags, sang with snowslides and echoed through the ravines.

Some hours later, after settling for a well-deserved rest, we followed the trail down valley beyond the meadow, descending steep hillsides among trees flush with blossom, and came at last upon a settlement of five houses. The sun was beaming, streams chuckled, a simple mill churned grain. We sat by the main stream and dipped our feet in the water and waited for the approach of locals. Eventually two men appeared. We ate *daal bhat* and drank tea together. They offered a pipe, squatting on their hunkers as Kirken began the quizzing. What was the name of their village? They gave it. What was the name of the river? A shrug of the shoulders. Where does the valley go? They looked at one another. A confused expression, another shrug of the shoulders. Then one of them babbled something helpful. The gist of it was: 'If you go downstream for one day you will come to another village.' That was the extent of their world. A day's walk downstream.

So we followed the stream down valley and, sure enough, after a camp on a scrub terrace, came to another village. The same questions, the same uncertainties. But as our valley was now digging itself in a south-westerly trend away from where we wanted to go, Kirken encouraged one of the villagers, a hunter, to lead us over the eastern wall of mountains where, hopefully, we would be able to resume the traverse. It was an interesting morning's climb to a wooded saddle from which we gained a fine panorama of Himalayan snow peaks stretching in a line that included Indian massifs as well as Api, Nampa, the nearer Kapchuli and a jostling array of summits missing from the map. A woodpecker rattled a nearby branch, primulas poked through snow pockets, and all the world was as it should be; untroubled and untroubling.

Instead of descending the far side of the saddle, the hunter led us off to the right, twisting among trees to gain height over a bluff on a vague trail we would never have found by ourselves. Up and up it went, frustratingly, but then at last we were chasing downhill in a mad dash onto an open meadow that ought to have had a stream running through it, but didn't. We had not seen water since breakfast, and the boys were growing thirsty. The hunter led us on for another hour, then stopped on a high hillside overlooking a vast southern view where one *lekh* after another folded down

to blue-hinted valley systems shimmering in the afternoon sunlight. He pointed to a gully cutting south-east and suggested that was where we should aim for. Then he was gone and we were left to our own devices in a trailless landscape that seethed with insect life.

That night on a shelf by a stream I poured sweat and hacked through the dark hours with the onset of a fever that later turned into a racking chest infection, courtesy, no doubt, of the snotty kids at the potato feast. At last we came to the Seti River, followed it upstream for a day and a bit towards Saipal, then cut off to the east on a trail that wound onto a fine *lekh* dotted with villages. A glen cut into the *lekh*, and through it ran several streams. Terraces fanned across the hills, and I remember the rich greenery of young millet, the brilliant scarlet of a woman bent double at work in the fields, buffalo complaining at the day, the far-off laughter of children. Ah, to be wandering again through such a land with little idea where you are!

One morning early, before light had properly stolen through the hills, I heard what I took to be rainfall – though no rain was touching the tent. I looked out to see in the gloom a vast flock of sheep and goats pushing along the dusty trail, their cloved hooves softly tap-tapping as imitation rain. Each animal wore a double pannier of rice, and in their wake stepped wild-eyed Humla herders, their worldly belongings carried in bundles across their shoulders.

For countless generations the people of Humla have been making long trading journeys over the Himalayan divide, using their goats and sheep as juggernauts. Now we had stumbled upon their trail, and for the next few days we shared with them the valleys, passes, river crossings and sometimes the night camps too. What privilege there was in that! What joy to cough the same dust, to drink the same ginger soup-like tea, to be bruised by the same rock-hard panniers as the animals bullied each other to pass on trails too narrow for comfort. What delight to witness an ancient procession that owed its ancestry to other millennia, unchanged and unchanging. Of a night I would sit and watch the campfires spark and crackle. Only the stars, it seemed, were older than this.

I lost all sense of time as the traverse continued, the map no longer trusted. Directions were taken by word of mouth from one village to the next, one valley to the next. It was the journey that mattered, the daily act of trekking through a land untouched by the West, among peoples for whom technology had virtually ended with the millstone. And there were other considerations too, beyond that of trying to commit mountain vistas to memory. Our food supplies had dwindled, and although we had confidently expected to be able to live off the land, those villages we came upon had little to spare. Their's was a millet and barley land. There were no more potatoes, rice was hard to come by, chickens and goats impossible to obtain. At one remote teahouse Kirken haggled for five bantam eggs. In another valley we managed to get two fish – each no more than eight inches long – but they did not go far between the seven of us, no matter how much I prayed

for a miracle of Biblical proportions. Our rations were halved and as a consequence each successive pass doubled our efforts.

Then we were among the people of Mugu, whose language Kirken spoke well, and they directed us to the valley of the Khanyer Khola, the river which, despite what several authorities claim, flows from Rara Lake. Two days of wandering through the valley brought us to the shores of this beautiful stretch of water, and suddenly we knew the end of our traverse of the Farthest West was nearly over. Hungry and weak I lay by my tent and gazed across the lake to snow peaks filling the far horizon, and imagined I had been transported to Switzerland. Serene is the most apt adjective to describe this glorious place with its unspoiled forests, open grasslands, crystal water and far views, and when we departed it was with reluctance, delaying to absorb the magic of sunrise before breaking off to the south for the crossing of our last two passes.

A couple of days later we stumbled down the never-ending trail to Jumla, passing a group of perspiring trekkers heading uphill bound for a week-long circuit of Rara. As light was fading I came upon a lady doctor from New Zealand who, with her husband, was working at Jumla's leprosy clinic. She was eager to talk and we chatted for some time in the litter-strewn street. As I was about to leave in order to catch Kirken and the boys who were being swallowed by the darkness, I remembered it was Good Friday.

'Happy Easter for Sunday,' I said

'Easter? On Sunday? Oh yes, so it is! Say - you wouldn't have any Easter eggs, would you?'

Easter eggs? I wished ...

Author's note: Should any AC members be interested in undertaking 'off the beaten track' (or more conventional) journeys through the Nepal Himalaya, I can highly recommend Kirken Sherpa at Himalayan Paradise & Mountaineering Pvt Ltd, GPO Box 5343, Chabahil, Kathmandu, Nepal. Fax: 00977 1 471103



42. Western Nepal: the Karnali River which forms the western limit of Mugu district.
(*Kev Reynolds*) (p157)