

Nepal's shrinking Annapurna Circuit



By *Stacy Tasman* 27th May 2011

In less than a year, a road will turn one of the world's most challenging treks into a short hike in the Himalayas.

In less than a year, a road will cut Nepal's classic 250-kilometre Annapurna Circuit in half, threatening the livelihoods of local villages and turning one of the world's most challenging treks into a short hike in the Himalayas.

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The Annapurna Circuit features several famous Himalayan high peaks including Manaslu, Dhaulagiri and Annapurna I, II, III and IV, with Annapurna I towering at 8,091 metres as the 10

th

highest peak in the world. A good taste of the trek, which includes Thorong La pass (the highest point at 5,416 metres) and skips much of the terrain thereafter, can be done in 10 to 12 days, but trekking the entire 250-kilometre route requires closer to three weeks. When the road is fully constructed in spring of 2012, the first 10 days of the trip will be cut to a two-day dusty drive.

Though the new road will make it easy for short trips, resort-style hikes and commercial luxuries, it will cut out the earlier walking paths that Nepal and its loyal trekkers have coveted since the country first opened its doors to outsiders in 1949. It will also destroy the serene, expansive and raw environment that the country, envied for its hefty share of the Himalayas, has long been noted for. The thrill of reaching Thorong La pass, which once took an inspiring two weeks, will be shortened to two days, and this epic and emotional day, which haunts you in the most motivating way, will lose much of its glory if reached by such an industrial path.

Tea houses, porters, guides and craftsmen nestled in these villages have had a long history of supporting trekkers on their way to Thorong La pass and their livelihood depends on the passing foot-traffic. The three-fourths completed road will allow tourists to bypass these villages and drive straight up to Manang, a larger town where many trekkers take a rest the night before crossing the pass.

The quickened route may also take a toll on how hikers adjust to the higher altitudes. A slow and steady trek that allows time for acclimatization is the safest way to ascend and prevent altitude sickness, which could have fatal consequences.

The **Himalayan Rescue Association**, a non-profit health organization that offers safety seminars to trekkers in Manang, warns that ascending more than 300 or 400 metres higher than the previous day's sleeping altitude is not safe, especially when you are above 3,000 metres. The newly constructed road will lead from Besi Sahar, at 820 metres to Manang, at 3,520 metres, allowing travellers to ascend 2,700 metres in just two driving days

Go now

With less than a handful of prime trekking months left before the road is finished, the time to go is now, before modern conveniences overtake the most prized and ancient cultural experience in Nepal.

For ideal conditions and the clearest views, spring and autumn are the best seasons to go, April and May or September and October specifically. It is important to give yourself a relaxed schedule, as the essence of the Annapurna Circuit is the area's tranquil ability to cease time.

Annapurna is manageable for trekkers with little experience. The circuit is more known for its varied terrain than its difficulty, and while some days can be a challenge, each day can be completed by mid-afternoon.

Along the circuit, travellers are afforded comfortable resting in traditional-style tea houses. The houses are conveniently spaced less than an hour walking distance from each other and offer steaming tea, hearty plates of fuel and warm, if firm, beds. The menus are easy to read, in English and are surprisingly extensive. Pastries can be found up and down the trail, and Yak steaks, or Nepal's native dish Dal Bhat, can supply much-needed protein.

The higher your elevation, the more expensive your costs, but that is in extremely relative terms. On average, lodging will cost you 50 to 200 Nepali rupees a night, and each meal with a pot of tea, will run you 200 to 300 rupees.

Additional expenses come when enlisting the help of porters and guides. Your best bet, if sticking to a lighter budget and pack-load, is to hire a combined porter-guide - someone to carry your packs who speaks enough English to provide backcountry education and native guidance, but who has not had the professional training to warrant higher wages. Expect to pay 900 to 1,400 rupees a day for your porter-guide, and use word of mouth to find one that is reliable.

You will most likely start off your trek in either Kathmandu or Pokhara, where hostels, hotels or recently-returned trekkers can offer recommendations. If a tour company is more your style, there are plenty of local English-speaking agencies to go through.

The circuit is also well-reputed for its ease without a guide. It is extremely accessible and can be navigated with the help of frequent direction posts or by the pointing fingers of local villagers. These trails, many that seem magically untouched by time, are the same trails that villagers have used for years to import and export their well-beings. It is safe to say that almost every hour you will pass a native Nepalese carrying four times the size of your pack with one-eighth the difficulty.



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