

*Dulkara, crossing the Kyalunpa Khola, which flows from Dhaulagiri.*



DULKARA MARTIG

# A SLOW-PACED JOURNEY: WALKING ACROSS NEPAL

**I have naturally itchy feet, always further aggravated by the Banff Mountain Film Festival. Last year as I walked out of the theatre, I vowed to succumb to the itching and set off on a longer journey. A few weeks after completing my first NZOIA assessment I found myself embarking on an unsupported traverse of Nepal with Tom Goodman. On our third day we had covered the distance we had planned to do in one. It didn't seem to matter. Our destination soon became merely a distant focus, a direction to head in.**

Our journey started in Kathmandu, where we worked our way through a logistical minefield of paperwork to be signed off by government authorities. From the hustle and bustle, we made our way to Darchula, a town on the far Western border of Nepal, where a wire bridge over the river joins India and Nepal. Then we started walking east.

We passed through expansive areas of wild rhododendron, blanketing the hills in deep red and crimson. Some days were baking hot, leaving us feeling dizzy as we made our way through seas of cacti taller than us and spotted papaya trees bearing fruit ready to devour in the early monsoon.

We travelled through small villages and towns, on Himalayan trails that had been walked for thousands of years. Some were starting to see motorised traffic, and works were in progress to widen paths so jeeps could rattle their way further into the Himalaya. Some trails will never see motors. Change is inevitable, but occasionally I couldn't help but wish things would remain as they were.

Walking became a way of stitching together many moments, experiences, landscapes and encounters with people. We went to bed with the sun, woke with the sun and never wore a watch. Time was measured in high passes, new friends and changing landscapes. We forgot the sound of cars, traffic lights and advertising vying for our attention. Instead, we admired turquoise and deep red Himalayan butterflies and beautifully coloured native birds as they flitted between trees, singing their hearts out. Monkeys swung out in front of us, looking back with cheeky grins silently challenging us to try to catch them.

We crossed many streams and rivers, on everything from single log bridges to modern, sturdy, wire suspended bridges, suggestive of the size of the rivers when swollen with the monsoon rains. Snow-melt creeks often stranded us in the early afternoon and we'd camp early, spending the time soaking in the surroundings, basking in the sun if we were lucky.

Some tracks were like treadmills as we fought our way through a slush of snow melt, donkey piss and mud. Other times we were on cobbled pathways, and as I made my way slowly up, I could almost see the faces of the men who had placed the stones by hand so carefully and so long ago. Many stones were shiny, polished by the thousands of people who had walked those paths before us.

Many days we stopped walking earlier than anticipated, graciously accepting invitations to stay with locals we'd met on the trail. We took refuge from the baking afternoon sun under verandahs, munched on samosas around lunchtime and regularly went to bed satisfied with a large helping of dahl baht. Other evenings we sat hungry under rock bivvies, sheltering from snowstorms alongside Tibetan nomads.

**Diary excerpt:** The contrast between the old and the new hits me here. My eyes dart around the room and I see hints of changing times. Stacks of cheap canned beer from China accompany local rice brew, Snickers bars are neatly stacked on shelves next to dried yak cheese, and synthetic clothing peeks out from beneath yak-wool coats.

The scent of juniper rises from chimneys. It is the only wood available and is just used to light fires which are then sustained with yak dung. Houses are made of mud and stone and whole villages blend into the surroundings. There is little disconnect between people and nature; everything blends into the land in this high-altitude desert. Even human remains are left for the vultures that can be seen gliding through the valleys, as offerings to the gods. Life is tough, but there is a peacefulness, a sense of contentment and a deep connection with nature evident amongst the locals.

Our ears became accustomed to the ringing of bells as donkeys, laden with bags of grain or large rocks for building a house, trotted past at incredible speed, leaving us in pools of dust and almost knocking us off our feet. Alongside donkeys were men, women and children carrying heavy baskets overflowing with supplies. Later, loads were carried by small goats and then yaks as we entered the high altitude desert of the Upper Dolpa region. Soon marmots' heads popped up, and fresh snow leopard poo and footprints egged us on up high-altitude passes, exciting us with the chance of spotting one of the elusive cats.

With each step, our final destination became less important. Places, trails and landscapes blurred together, like ragged prayer flags on a high alpine pass slowly fading with the elements. I settled into the rhythm of life on foot and soon days, weeks and a couple of months passed.

**Diary excerpt:** Some people are drawn to wild places; our hearts beat stronger. Here I see life in all of its vastness, all of its beauty, and its extraordinary depth. My heart dances, it beats stronger in these mountains. Life is stripped to the bare necessities; it's impossible not to see what is most important.

Something about this place vibrates through me, like the sound of the conch shell in morning prayer in Saldang. It flows through the valleys like faded prayer flags dancing in the wind, elevating the soul of everyone who passes through. It's not just a connection to nature, but to a culture and community of people with so much history and depth.

*Tom Goodman and Dulkara Martig near the Bhima Lojun La, looking towards the Annapurna range.*



We spent an evening huddled in a circle around a fire alongside nomads drinking Tibetan butter tea and eating boiled potatoes dipped in chilli. Communication mostly consisted of toothy-grinned smiles and crazy gestures. While we had only backpacks, these families had herds of animals, hoards of grain to keep them sustained during the winter months and small toddlers to bring over the pass safely. As we slid into our sleeping bags and zipped up our light-weight Macpac tent, beside us our new friends shared yak-wool blankets, which they had spun and woven themselves, and sought shelter in a hand-made tipi. We packed up in the morning and a young boy looked on curiously. Meanwhile I observed the women boiling what looked like ordinary grass for breakfast.

On one of our final days in Dolpa – as the monsoon was looming – I found myself perched on a rocky mountain top, mesmerised by gigantic eagles soaring, swooping and diving like kites. I visualised myself soaring high above the vast valleys alongside these magnificent giants with their patterned wingspans. I felt the ancient heart of Dolpa beating strong that afternoon. As our time in this mysterious land drew to an end, I was almost hesitant to turn the final page. Then we were back on a local ▶

*Dulkara, where the Bheri Khola flows into the Kyalunpa Khola, Dolpa region.*



Glacier near the Chan La, Dolpa region.



bus, rattling our way towards civilisation after around 70 days. As for our original goal of crossing the entire country on foot, we only made it halfway before the monsoon arrived. I was sold on the joys of slow-paced journeys, and one day I'll head back to resume walking where we left off.

### How this trip influenced my journey as an outdoor instructor

This trip changed my path in the outdoor industry, fuelling my inspiration to start instructing on longer wilderness programmes, which led me to the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS). Before this journey I was usually racing the clock on personal trips in New Zealand. Walking the entire day and just making it to camp before nightfall. Dinners would be rushed, often half cooked and food was simply energy. I will continue to push physical limits in the outdoors at times, but I have a newfound appreciation for slow-paced journeys where instead of merely rushing past, I interact with the surroundings on a deeper level and have time to simply be.

During a longer journey, you become part of the landscape. You become progressively more connected and in tune with nature. The wilderness becomes, not merely a backdrop, it becomes your home.

*Dulkara Martig, World Challenge Leader and NOLS instructor.*

## NZOIA Training & Assessment

ASSESSMENT FEES	
Assessment course	Course fee
Abseil Leader	Contact an assessor directly
Bush Walking Leader	
Canoe Leader	
Kayak Leader	
Rock Climbing Leader	
Sea Kayak Leader	
Sea Kayak 1 Upgrade	\$290
Sport Climbing Endorsement	\$545 - \$595
Canoe 1	
Cave 1	
Rock 1	
Sport Climbing Instructor	
Kayak 2 – Class 3 River MMt	
Kayak 2 – Skills Instruction	\$730 - \$780
Alpine 1	
Bush 1 & 2	
Canyon 1 & 2	
Cave 2	
Kayak 1	
Rock 2	\$930
Sea Kayak 1 & 2	
Alpine 2	

The course calendars for Training and Assessments can be found at [www.nzoia.org.nz](http://www.nzoia.org.nz). Members are notified of updates to the calendar via the NZOIA 4YA – our weekly email.

### Booking for an NZOIA Assessment, Training or Refresher Workshop

1. Go to [www.nzoia.org.nz](http://www.nzoia.org.nz)
2. Check out the Syllabus & Assessment Guide, if you are applying for an assessment then make sure you meet all the pre-requisites.
3. On the course calendar, find the event you want to apply for (you will need to be logged into your member profile) and select 'Apply'. Upload your logbook, summary sheet, first aid certificate and any other required documentation to your application. (NB: Non-members can attend Training Courses)
4. Applications close 6 weeks before the course date.
5. After the closing date we will confirm that the course will run.
6. If we cancel the course we will refund all fees.
7. If NZOIA cancels a course, you will receive a full refund/transfer of your fee. If you withdraw before the closing date, you will receive a full refund of your fee.
8. **If you withdraw after the closing date of a course, the fee is non-refundable. It is transferable under exceptional circumstances (e.g. bereavement, medical reasons), medical certificates/other proof may be required. Contact the Programme and Membership Manager for more details.**

TRAINING COURSES		
Course Duration	NZOIA members	Non - members
1 day courses	\$200	\$315
2 day courses	\$400	\$515

### Further Information

Details of courses run by NZOIA, pre-requisites and online payment are all available at: [www.nzoia.org.nz](http://www.nzoia.org.nz)

### Courses by special arrangement

It is possible to run assessments on other dates. You will need a minimum of 3 motivated candidates and the date of when you would like the course to be run. Go to the FAQ page on the website [www.nzoia.org.nz/faq#custom](http://www.nzoia.org.nz/faq#custom) for details on how to arrange a course. **Course Costs:** all courses run by NZOIA are discounted for members.

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Excellence in Outdoor Leadership

[www.nzoia.org.nz](http://www.nzoia.org.nz)