



ALL ABOUT THE ALTITUDE

SARAH CLOVIS-ALEXANDER ON EXPERIENCING FAR-FLUNG DESTINATIONS ON FOOT

I've always been a traveller. I've travelled widely in the Caribbean, India, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Vietnam and Europe for six months. I've always taken the view that you need to really immerse yourself in a locality to experience it. Allowing myself to be based in and then out again wouldn't really qualify as a genuine travel experience, in my book.



So last year, when I decided to travel to Nepal, I signed up – without thinking too deeply about it – for a five-hour trek along the Annapurna range, setting off from Pokhara, in the west of the country, and ending at Sarangkot. I travelled with my mum. We were part of a small and pretty-mixed-ability group tackling what turned out to be one of the most testing things I've done.

Although I consider myself quite fit – I run regularly – I would say I wasn't the fittest I've ever been when I set out on this particular journey. Since then, I've focused much more on my physical fitness. But weighing it up afterwards, if anything, the trek

itself was more of a mental challenge than a physical one. At nearly 2,000m above sea level, the altitude was most definitely a factor, as were the temperatures. But, bearing in

mind this was an unfamiliar location, just keeping going, and keeping our morale up, was hard to do. Hard, but immensely satisfying. The route took our group through incredibly diverse landscapes. We set off

from Pokhara, which is very populated, and passed through villages and jungles before reaching the rolling hills and then the steeper slopes of the range itself. I remember a vantage point about two-thirds of the way up a mountain, where we were above the clouds, watching eagles circling below us. Somewhat chastening at this point was the sight of an elderly woman carrying a bundle of sticks and making her way up the steep gradients with ease. It was an interesting and surreal sight, particularly as she was smoking a cigarette at the time. A lifetime exposure to hillwalking at altitude had clearly given her an edge.

We, meanwhile, learned early on in our trek that sitting down to rest was not the best policy. Getting up and going again was a painful and exacting business.

Reaching the end of the trek and the heights of Sarangkot felt like a huge achievement. The landscape was so unfamiliar and majestic – unlike any other I've encountered. The breathlessness, the cold, the barely lukewarm tea we were given to take the edge off, and even the painful joints that resulted, were all worthwhile sacrifices when set against the beauty of that hard-to-reach place and the sight of the clouds rolling in across the world's highest mountain range.

The walk itself was tough, but the overnight stay in a wooden shack at the top of the climb was far from restful. I've never slept in so many clothes and yet still felt the effects of extreme cold. And getting down those mountain passes was far from easy. But the sense of achievement and the camaraderie that grew within our group got us through. The experience has persuaded me that trekking brings a whole new perspective to travel. It enhanced the memory of that trip and those sights in a way that little else could.

All about the ANNAPURNA RANGE

- The Annapurna range, located in north-central Nepal, reaches more than 8,000m. Annapurna I was the first 8,000m peak ever climbed.
- The Annapurna Base Camp, at 4,130m, is a majestic setting and the starting point to the region's impressive peaks: Annapurna I (8,091m), Annapurna South (7,219m), Machhapuchhre (6,993m) and Hiunchuli (6,441m).
- The effect of high altitudes on humans is significant. It primarily impacts the oxygen levels in the blood, and therefore affects cardiovascular and muscular performance. Over time, people living at high altitudes adapt to these conditions.
- High-altitude training for athletes has been popular since the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. The location was a controversial choice at the time, given its altitude at 2,300m.

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