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If there is a king of trails, a viceroy of Vibram, it could well be the Annapurna Circuit. Two thirds of the people who go hiking in the world's favorite trekking realm, Nepal, do it in the Annapurna region. Our correspondent hits the trail to find out what all the fuss is about.

BY KAREN CATCHPOLE
In Los Angeles, Milwaukee or Seattle, they'd hop in the SUV or Civic for a trip down the block. But here in Nepal, on the roof of the world, it's different. Students, doctors, high-tech execs, teachers and other car creatures would rather walk, thank you, despite the fact that it's 1) uphill and 2) higher than a flock of Canadian geese. It has something to do with the chance to hang out with the tallest characters on earth, that mass of Himalayan rock uplifted into 747 cruising altitude by a runaway subcontinent. It's as close as self-propelled mortals can get to the Big Sky.

Like other lowlanders, I wanted to walk in the shadow of that fabled skyline, so I headed for the trail that's made Nepal synonymous with trekking, the 205-mile Annapurna Circuit. It loops around ten of the highest peaks in the world, including 26,504-foot Annapurna, one of only fourteen 8,000-meter peaks in the world. Two other 8,000-meter peaks—Dhaulagiri (26,788 feet) and Manaslu (26,775 feet)—live right next door.

Another reason the Annapurna region is Nepal's most popular trekking attraction is the cultural and geographic diversity packed right along the way, from the Hindu-dominated farmlands of the lower altitudes to the sky-high realm of Buddhists and herders. The route begins in the classic Nepali lowlands with the friendly Gurungs and their immaculate rice paddies before ascending to almost 18,000 feet. Along the way there are rhododendron forests, mysterious Nyeshang villages, pilgrimage sites, ammonite fields, 900-year-old monasteries and centuries of trading lore. Long before it brought trekkers from the West, the Annapurna Circuit brought Buddhism from India, salt from Tibet, princesses from Ladakh and pilgrims from across Asia. It remains the only route through this region, where roads are, blessedly, not an option.

Though there is no shortage of companies in the U.S. and on the ground in Nepal to outfit your trek, my traveling partner, Eric, and I opted for a self-guided jaunt. We planned to follow the more manageable counterclockwise loop, which offers a gentle intro to the trail on its gradual ascent through the Marsyangdi River Valley. To save our legs, we caught a jammed local bus from the provincial capital of Pokhara and headed east to Besisahar at 2,700 feet, still sticky in the tropical heat. After stocking up on last-minute supplies, we stuffed our backpacks and headed out early in a futile attempt to beat the lowland fuming pan. We weren't long on the trail before I compensated, falling into the first river we came across. I often begin long treks this way, and I've come to view it as a sort of ritual baptism. This time it was probably just a mark of my clumsiness as my body tried to adjust from walking the streets of Manhattan to trekking the trails of Nepal.

From the outset of the trek, there's never any doubt about the goal here. Glimpses of the flocked and jagged crest of the Annapurna Range loom up between passes and switchbacks close enough that it feels like you're looking through a telephoto lens.

Only the Beginning: The Circuit winds up terraced foothills like these and into the heights of the Annapurnas' wall of white.

You're also looking back in time a few millennia. Some 55 million years ago, the Indian subcontinent slammed into the Eurasian plate, and the Annapurna region's dream team of high peaks was born. Apparently they ran short on names at some point—there are five Annapurnas in the group, labeled I through IV in order of height, plus Annapurna South, the shortest of the bunch at a mere 23,678 feet.

I got my trekking legs as the trail wound slowly and steadily upward for the next five days. We averaged a moderate ten miles a day, making our way through the Gurung villages of Bahundanda, Chamje and Bagarchhap. I threaded through a sea of green fields, flanked by glowing rice paddies and vegetable plots. Each village looked more like the cover girl for Nepal tourism than the last—friendly locals, gorgeous fields, laughing children and that backdrop of towering white ridges. The Western world was a long, long way away.

But the same can't be said for Western passports, which has prompted some local people to cash in farming or yak
Luckily Upper Pisang, like every self-respecting Buddhist village in Nepal, has a mani wall—a long, low structure made of stones bearing hand-carved Buddhist prayers. Buddhists carve and place a prayer stone on the wall to ask the gods for everything from a healthy life to a prosperous harvest to stellar marks on school exams. Eric and I used it to pray we didn’t get skewered from the onslaught of arrows.

When we’d finally made our way behind the line of marksmen, we found a place among the enthusiastic onlookers. For hours we sat watching arrows, shot at a bale of straw with a crude bulls-eye tacked to it. The rules of the game were obvious, except no one ever seemed to win. After several uneventful hours, it occurred to me that perhaps they were doing something quite unsportsmanlike these days—playing for the sheer fun of it.

The local inhabitants were Nye-shang. Like their more famous Sherpa brothers to the east, they originated on the other side of the Himalaya in Tibet. They specialized in trading, trafficking over the years in everything from musk to medicinal herbs. Despite their trading history, this village and its inhabitants were some of the poorest I’d seen. But that didn’t seem to get in the way of their hospitality. We were warmly welcomed into the beaten mud-and-stone home of a local family. “Namaste,” the lady of the house greeted us, her hands folded in the prayer position for this delightful Nepali take on “hello,” meaning “I salute the God within you that is the God within me.” We were quickly made to feel even more at home. An impromptu hairstyling was included in the 180-rupee (about $4) rate. One of the daughters of the house braided my hair as I sat on the flat roof of the stable waiting for my daily dose of daal bhaat.

herding for the tourist trade. Teahouses and guesthouses run by local families are never far from the trail. They offer comfortable lodging and hearty meals, often based loosely on Western fare like pizza and lasagna, not to mention apple pie, which has led some trekking snobs to refer to the Annapurna Circuit as the Apple Pie Circuit. Personally, I preferred the local staple, daal bhaat tarkhari, a dish of lentils, rice and vegetables. In fact, in Chamje I had a plate of daal bhaat with sautéed stinging nettles that was so tasty, I still get cravings for it.

After a full day of climbing through the upper stretches of the Marsyangdi Valley, we stumbled into the hamlet of Upper Pisang, where the main street was in an uproar. Men were shouting furiously, and arrows whizzed past our heads. We had arrived just in time for the local archery competition, which was taking place down the length of the main street.

The population is armed but not too dangerous in Upper Pisang, where local archers engage in a little trekker, er, target practice.
There are two ways out of Pisang—the low road and, of course, the high one. Feeling cocky after nearly a week of relatively easy trekking, we opted for the more vertical challenge. Let’s just say we didn’t stay cocky for very long. The trail, often no more than livestock tracks, ascended steeply. As I huffed and puffed, I kept reminding myself that I could be cruising along the relatively flat valley floor on the low route to Manang like normal trekkers.

Much thigh-burning later, I got my payoff. The tiny village of Gharyu, well above the tree line at 12,136 feet, offered our first clear and, I must say, humbling views of 26,033-foot Annapurna II and 24,780-foot Annapurna III. Inspired by the prize, we pushed on, following a trail marked with a white chorten, or stupa, one of the many outdoor Buddhist shrines that dot the trails of Nepal. This chorten housed a water-powered prayer wheel, which ensured that as long as the water kept tumbling out of the mountains, the wheel would keep turning, sending a constant stream of prayers to the universe. We were treated to a different stream of water. The sky soon unleashed a cold drizzle that soaked us all the way to Manang.

Nestled in a silty valley floor at the base of towering mountains, Manang is a study in earth tones, flat-topped dwellings in shades of taupe, brown and slate looking as if they sprang from the clay and rock around them—which they did. Most are made of stone. Some Manang residents have become wealthy by trading another kind of stone, Burmese rubies. I watched as villagers flaunted their wealth, sprucing up the place by raising a host of tree-trunk-size prayer flagpoles, adorned with colorful cloth flags printed with Buddhist prayers. The faithful believe that each flap in the breeze scatters the prayers to the ends of the earth, bringing with each flutter contentment—monetary or otherwise—to all.

*Speaking in Turns:* The faithful turn prayer wheels inside a temple at the holy shrine of Muktinath. Each spin is equal to a verbal prayer to the Buddha.

As remote and otherworldly as it looks, Manang is a featured stop on the trekking circuit, serving as an important acclimatization hub. Smart trekkers spend at least two nights here at 11,529 feet, gobbling food and taking day walks to slightly higher elevations in order to give their bodies some time to start producing enough extra red blood cells to compensate for the higher altitudes and thinner air to come. I hiked up to higher ground and came down to sleep, buffing up my red cells. The Himalayan Rescue Association has a medical outpost here to treat injuries or illnesses, and Western medical volunteers give free daily lectures about the warning signs, dangers and treatment of acute mountain sickness (AMS).

Another reason to linger in Manang is its close proximity to Braga and the 900-year-old monastery of the Kargyu sect of Buddhism that still stands there. Only a few monks still live in the somewhat neglected monastery, and they were happy to see us the day we walked up a small hill to poke around its three main buildings, trailed respectfully by an ancient monk.

*Between a Rock and a Hard Place:* The monochromatic realm of far-flung Manang, Gangapurna in background.
After admiring the terra-cotta images, fading frescoes and stunning views of the Manang Valley, we found a picnic spot on the hill below the monastery and ate in its peaceful shadow.

But it wasn't always this peaceful here. As recently as the 1950s, Braga and Manang were at war with each other, which explains why French climber Maurice Herzog and his party were denied hospitality in the area when he passed through in 1950 on a recon trip before making the first ascent of Annapurna I. The area was reopened in 1976, making the complete Annapurna Circuit trek possible.

The snow began to fall lightly while we were in Manang, adding to my mounting anxiety about the next day's climb, the toughest leg of the trek—the notorious Thorung La, a pass that crests at a wheezing 17,760 feet. The combination of hearsay and rumor about the pass combined to create an almost mythic dread in my head. Was it true that a group of Germans were lost on the top last year? Was it really 2,000 feet higher than Mont Blanc? Do some Nepali porters really refuse to cross it?

The preclimb prognostication got more intense at Thorung Phedi, the base camp for pass pilgrims, where we spent the night before the big day in a ramshackle cluster of rooms with about 30 others. It was a weird scene, groups of anxious trekkers trying to appear calm as they contemplated the mountain ahead. In late April, most of us were simply hoping that the storms that looked set to blitz us would blow over, since attempting to cross the 17,760-foot Thorung La in bad weather is not a mark of genius. Some hapless trekkers had been stuck here for days waiting for a "good" pass day.

I spent the evening countdown distractedly playing what felt like hundreds of games of gin rummy and pointedly not talking about the pass. Nepali porters for other trekking parties tried to teach us local folk songs. Tense and bored, I finally went to bed at nine, setting my alarm for 4 A.M. An early start is essential since, even in ideal conditions, it takes an average of ten hours to make the pass and get down the other side. Too keyed up, I spent most of the night awake, checking to make sure my alarm clock was set properly.

Anticipation—and the altitude—woke me up before the alarm went off. We were dressed and out the door with the other contenders before four. As we paid our bill, I asked the weathered Nepali lodge owner, who'd been over the pass more times than he could count, what the day's weather would be. He simply shook his head knowingly, but it was impossible for me to read exactly what it was that he knew.

The climb started off deceptively easily; I trudged up a slow, steady incline along a flank of the ridge, crunching snow that had fallen overnight. Eric and I fell into place in the line of trekkers inching up, up, up. I tried to keep my eyes focused on Eric's swaying pack, as advised by the AMS lecture in Manang. I found myself going over and over my packing list. Did I have enough water, snacks, clothing? I was consciously conserving energy, and I felt unnaturally attuned to my breathing and my head, on the alert for any sign of the dreaded acute mountain sickness: headaches, fatigue, uneven breathing, nausea, loss of coordination. No one said a word as we shuffled on, waiting for the sun to join us.

It never did. Instead the weather nosedived, and we found ourselves in the middle of a dumping snowstorm. I started to notice trekkers passing us on their way back down. Some were cursing; others were laughing. All had decided that the weather, the pass or both looked too daunting. Almost a third

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GUIDE TO GUIDES

With nearly 50,000 trekkers drawn to the Annapurna region each year, the trail can get a little too cozy depending on when you go. Peak Annapurna trekking seasons are from early October to late November and from late February to mid May (either snows or monsoons make for miserable trekking on the pass the rest of the year). I traveled in April and May, which meant fewer crowds but more chance of showers—and leeches.

There are several options for doing the Annapurna Circuit—from going with a U.S.-based outfitter (see "Doing It," p. 98), to finding a trekking agency on the ground in Kathmandu or Pokhara, to hiring a private porter, to going solo. If you book your trip from the U.S., you'll get the most amenities. The top companies may also offer more environmental safeguards and minimum-impact trekking features such as packing out the garbage and water bottles and using kerosene for fuel. Most companies will arrange for international and domestic transportation right up to the trailhead, negotiate permits and visas and provide highly trained guides with knowledge of health and safety issues, food, gear, oxygen and emergency medical supplies.

Booking on the ground will usually save you some cash, costing between $20 and $80 per person per day depending on the number of guides/porters needed and the degree of comfort you require—but you'll have to do a little more of the legwork. Ask other travelers returning from treks for agency recommendations and be sure to meet your guide before you hit the trail to make sure he/she really does speak English. Ask about what gear and medical supplies the guide carries, and be aware that it is often the trekker's responsibility to outfit the guide for crossing the Thorung La. This means you may need to buy sunglasses, socks, even boots for him.

It's also perfectly feasible to do the Annapurna trek independently. The trail is well marked, and there are ample villagers around to correct you if you happen to go astray. There is no shortage of quality teahouses along the trail, which cost $3 to $4 per person per day. Trekking alone, however, is never wise. You'll likely find company at guesthouse bulletin boards and local bakeries, where travelers often look for trekking buddies. —K.C.
of the trekkers who started the climb up the pass with us turned around and went back. Eric and I silently wondered what they knew that we didn't, but neither of us wanted to be the first one to contemplate turning back. Just the day before, on our idyllic walk from Manang to Thorung Phedi, I had been boasting about what a piece of cake the trek had been.

But now my head was pounding and my steps were getting more and more labored as we took turns breaking trail in snow that was getting deeper the higher we climbed. Drifting clouds and snow flurries created whiteout conditions that made us reluctant to stop and rest. And then we could no longer see anyone else on the mountain. What was worse, we didn't even know if we were on the trail anymore. The only thing we were sure of was that we were still going up.

"I've got 17,000 feet," Eric called out, checking his altimeter watch.

Just then, with the summit less than half an hour away, I saw two figures up ahead. One was sitting in the snow, unable or unwilling to move. As I reached him, I could see he was having trouble talking and didn't seem to know where he was. He complained of nausea and a terrible headache, classic signs of AMS. His somewhat more coherent friend explained that they were just resting; he seemed totally unaware of the danger they were in. The two friends were Israelis in their early twenties, young and strong enough, they thought, to race right up the pass. They obviously hadn't bothered with the AMS lecture back in Manang.

Luckily, Eric doesn't climb stairs without a supply of dexamethasone, a drug prescribed to stabilize a person with signs of AMS long enough to get him to a lower altitude and, hopefully, recovery. He gave a dose to the sicker of the two and got them to their feet. But they refused to go back down to Thorung Phedi, insisting they could make it to the top. I decided this was not the time to point out that irrational thinking is another sign of AMS.

Feeling cold and less than perky ourselves, and with the weather and visibility worsening, we were anxious to get to the other side. We pushed on, looking over our shoulders until the boys fell too far behind to see. Struggling for footing and breath, we lunged forward through the clouds and snow. When we finally staggered the last few steps to the top of Thorung La, we hardly knew we were there. The clouds were sitting right on the ground, obscuring my hoped-for view of the Annapurna Range. Which hardly mattered. We had climbed 3,240 feet in four hours, and it felt like it. My head was pounding. I felt heavy and light at the same time. Everything was cold and wet, except for the six square inches of my exposed face, beginning to get extremely sunburned as the sun's rays were intensified by the reflection off the falling snow—and the fact that I was more than three miles closer to the sun than normal. I was physically and mentally exhausted, and the descent was still to come.

Eric and I took a few quick photos at the top and slowly began making our way down the other side of the pass. Remarkably, the 3,200-foot descent down Thorung La was both longer and harder than the climb up—steeper and less stable than the ascent side. To make matters worse, the snow was melting, creating slick slopes that often had to be slid down butt first.

The "fish tail" spire of Machapuchhare, a slippery slope that has never been summited.
After an hour or so of descending in this less than dignified style, a young woman approached us on the run. The Israeli kid was in trouble again, she said. He'd actually reached the top of the pass, but he'd begun throwing up blood along with the dexamethasone we'd given him earlier. He'd sent her ahead to find us and beg for some more. So back up the pass we went to give him more pills and help him get down as quickly as possible. The boys looked extremely weak, but all we could do was give them some pills and hope for the best.

At 5 P.M., 13 hours after we began, muddy and exhausted, we finally stumbled into Muktinath, the village at the base of the other side of the pass, and fell into bed. The Israelis were thankful to be alive. I was thankful that the pass was behind us.

Muktinath, as it turned out, was the perfect place to give thanks. The temples here have attracted both Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims for hundreds of years, for eerily similar reasons. Hindus believe that Brahma himself blessed the waters of the Jwala Mai Temple, creating an apparent miracle to mark the occasion: a flame that appears to burn inside a stream of water. Buddhists believe the waters of Muktinath were consecrated by drops of holy water from sacred Lake Manasarovar in Tibet, brought by Padmasambhava, also known to Buddhists as Guru Rinpoche, when he passed through in the 8th century.

The Vishnu Temple in Muktinath features a bathing pool with 108 spouts (108 is a sacred number in Buddhism). Hindus believe that bathing in all 108 spouts brings salvation. I stuck my hand under one spout, which was enough to convince me that, salvation or not, it was way too cold for an outdoor bath. Buddhists, who view the temple as a shrine to the naga (snake) god, believe that worshiping there will free you from the sins of this lifetime—which seems like a much more pleasant way to nirvana. The faithful also believe that drinking the water at Vishnu washes away even the “five immeasurable sins,” which include killing your father or mother, killing an arhat (follower of the Buddha), causing dissension among Buddhists and causing Buddha's blood to flow. I was beginning to wonder what sort of crowd we were hanging out with.

The pilgrims in Muktinath were a mix of dreadlocked sadhus and maroon-robed monks, here to gain merit and better karma. Putting up a silk banner at Muktinath is said to ensure that you'll be reborn as a "universal monarch," and repairing the shrine protects you from attacks by dangerous animals. It's not surprising that the current king of Nepal had a helipad constructed here so he can fly in and out as necessary.

After a well-earned rest day in Muktinath, we hiked downhill to Kagbeni, a fertile village at 9,217 feet. Seeing green after five days at altitudes that support little more than yaks and rocks was refreshing. The medieval village's labyrinthine streets and crumbling gray mud buildings are presided over by a domineering red monastery. In the center of town are the remains of a fort, constructed long ago when Kagbeni, located at the convergence of two valleys (one of which is the mysterious and restricted Mustang Valley), was an important fortress town. We spent hours exploring its dusty, rabbit-warren streets, attracting an entourage of local children as we wandered around, happily getting lost in the living history. The only reminder of which century we were in was the power line.

The farms of Kagbeni were replaced by the stark landscape of the Kali Gandaki River Valley. I struggled to stay upright in this gale magnet, which could double as GM’s wind tunnel facility. But the seemingly barren landscape did have life, albeit prehistoric. Before India and Asia began butting heads millions of years ago, eventually thrusting Everest and its sky-high, the ground I was walking on was ocean floor. This valley is a repository of ammonites, sea fossils encased in black rock.

Just past the Swiss-tidy village of Marpha there was another geological treasure. Without so much as a sign, the trail plunges into one of the deepest valleys on earth, more than three and a half miles down. On one side, the bank rises all the way up to Annapurna I. On the other side, the wall rises to continued on page 98
Dhaulagiri, the sixth-highest mountain in the world, with only 12 miles separating the two peaks. At the most dramatic point, we stood on the valley floor below the peaks towering miles above us, and a sort of reverse vertigo set in as I craned my neck to see the sky.

This is the end point for two-week trips on the circuit, but the power of this spectacle—and the fact that the monsoon still hadn’t hit—inspired us to take an extra week and continue on to Annapurna Sanctuary. We’d come this far. Why not go all the way? Only a fifth of the trekkers on the circuit take the side trip to the sanctuary, so this was also a chance to get off the beaten path.

To get to Annapurna Base Camp from Chitre, we took a shortcut toward Deorali at 8,275 feet. From Chitre, the trail wound its way even farther up until we entered a rhododendron forest worthy of J.R.R. Tolkien. In fact, rumor has it that Tolkien himself was inspired by these woods. True or not, I expected to see hobbits peeking out from behind every moss-covered tree trunk and bulging pitcher plant.

After a peaceful stroll in that enchanted forest, the trail switched back up again. At the top of the hill we entered Ghandruk, one of the largest Gurung villages in the region. Perched on a hill, the village is full of brightly painted houses, colorful flowers and great views. After a day in this idyllic setting I was ready to buy real estate—until I remembered the average December temperature at 11,000 feet.

The town of Chomrong marks the beginning of the heart of the Annapurna Sanctuary, a narrow valley that is the only way into Annapurna Base Camp. Trekkers at the guesthouse in Chomrong gave glowing descriptions of the base camp’s beauty and tranquillity. It was enough to motivate an early start the next morning, despite the fact that it was literally all uphill from there.

I stopped in at the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) checkpoint at the official entrance to the sanctuary. ACAP was started in 1982 by King Mahendra’s Trust for Nature Conservation. Its goal is to conserve the natural beauty of the area as well as the culture and customs of the people. Because it was declared a conservation area and not a national park, people living within the sanctuary have been allowed to stay in their villages as far up as Chomrong.

A handful of locals, mostly women trained in food preparation, basic English and how to use kerosene, have been given ACAP diplomas, which qualify them to own and run the teahouses that trekkers rely on along the sanctuary route.

As we climbed higher, the temperature dipped dramatically. But I was in good hands with local guesthouse owners, who developed an ingenious way to keep large groups of travelers warm. My hosts directed my shivering limbs to a dining table lined on all sides with a heavy wool blanket. They had a kerosene space heater tucked away underneath. I gratefully pulled the blankets over my upper body while the heater kept my lower body toasty. I’m sure it would never pass the fire code, but it worked for me.

It took three days of relentless altitude gain to reach one of Nepal’s most distinctive mountain vistas, the 12,195-foot Machhapuchhare Base Camp—though it’s hardly a base camp, since there’s been only one expedition on the mountain, and it’s never been summited. Standing at the foot of Nepal’s flamboyant “fish tail” mountain, it was easy to see why it’s considered sacred.

Because of its holy status, Machhapuchhare was also off-limits to women and garlic, both considered unholy, for centuries. Luckily those days are over, and I was free to order bowl after bowl of garlic soup at the local guesthouse before carrying on another 1,300 feet up to the real prize: Annapurna Base Camp.

It took us only two hours on the trail to reach the camp, where we found ourselves literally encircled by some of the world’s highest mountains. The word “cathedral” sprang to mind—as did “avalanche”—as I took in 26,504-foot Annapurna I in front of me, 23,678-foot Annapurna South and 21,132-foot Hiunchuli to the left, 18,579-foot Tent Peak to my right and 22,937-foot Machhapuchhare behind me. That night I lay awake listening to the icefall rumbling and rumbling down Annapurna I as if to wrap its arms around our guesthouse, which stood dwarfed at her feet.

Unlike Machhapuchhare, Annapurna I has been climbed—Maurice Herzog and his ill-prepared team made it up first on June 3, 1950. But this was far enough for me. In the morning I took a final look, craning up at the jagged skyline, on top of the world in my king-size sanctuary.

Karen Catchpole qualified for this story by trekking through the primary rainforest in northern Borneo (April 99).