

The Annapurna Circuit Guide

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The Annapurna Circuit: Too Beautiful to Miss

Somewhere between the baby goats who gingerly sniffed my hand before allowing me to pet them (like puppies do!), the baby cow which did the same, the little snorting yaks, village kids who put their hands together to say "namaste" (hello), the amazingly beautiful mountains that framed every moment, and the daily chai masala teas, it hit me: **this is bliss.**

Ned told me a bit about trekking in Nepal when [we climbed Mt. Kinabalu](#) together in Borneo and Laura told me a bit about the Annapurna sanctuary when we [trekked Mt. Rinjani](#) together in Indonesia, so it got tacked onto month 20 of my ongoing travels in Asia without much more than a second thought.

What I ended up experiencing was some of the most beautiful scenery I've ever seen on the longest trek I've ever attempted. Not only that, I did it without a guide or porter.

I carried all of my own gear (you can find out more about [what to bring here](#)), and got my permits on my own by bringing passport-sized photos, [travel insurance](#) (required!), and filling out the necessary paperwork. The rest was a slice of heaven.

Here's how you can do it, too:

Day one: Everyone starting from Pokhara heads to the tourist bus station to catch the 7am bus to Besisahar, where the trek officially begins (you can also go directly here from Kathmandu on a public bus). Most people take

an additional bus or even a Jeep to at least Bhubule or even Ngadi, where the last bus stops (which is what I did).

I met Ellen, who would become my trekking buddy for the rest of the trip, on the bus and we made fast friends.

Traveling took most of the day and allowed us to fit in about 8km to **Ghermu** as the sun was setting, where a young girl handed us seabuckhorn berries when we walked into the town. Everyone there was so friendly, saying "namaste" to us as we passed by. The guesthouse we chose also happened to brew roxi, a local spirit. This resulted in a few colorful characters stopping by, giving us a laugh and making dinner all that much more interesting. It was a great way to start what would become a wonderful two weeks. Ghermu, I love you.

Would you like some seabuckhorn berries?

Day two: We learned to ask for breakfast a half hour before we actually wanted to eat it when it arrived a half hour late the next morning. The earlier one starts trekking in the morning, the better, as at the lower altitudes it can still be boiling hot outside.

We walked the 16km to **Karte**, which is one town just beyond where most people stop in Tal. Unfortunately much of this trail is along a road that is shared with Jeeps, which churn up a lot of dust.

Day three: This was a long one! We walked 30 km to **Dhukur Pokhane** after arriving at Bhratrang at 6pm and finding only two more beds (there were three in our group) at the only tea house in town. Ellen and I walked an additional hour to the next town just as the sun was setting, which had a good six tea houses to choose from, and plenty of beds!

Most people on this day would have stopped in Chame, but it was only 3pm when we arrived there, so we kept going.

I'll always remember this as the first day I ever pet a cow. I recall how a friend of mine wanted so badly to pet one in the rural area of [Phang Nga in Vietnam](#) a few months before and how I'd laughed at him, sure he would

get kicked or bitten. When the calf sniffed his hand and then dipped his head as if to say, "go ahead," I was shocked.

This time it was Ellen who worked up the bravery to pet the baby calf first, who reacted the same way. I followed suit this time, surprised by how soft and sweet it was.

Day four: There's a choice of taking the upper or lower Pisang trail on this day.

Lower runs along the road and is much easier, while upper involves a steep 600 meter gain but is good for acclimating and is the more beautiful trek by far, offering magnificent views of the Annapurna peaks. Naturally we took the **Upper Pisang trail** ending in **Manang**, in the middle of a snowstorm no less, for a total of 20km walking that day.

Day five: This was a rest day in **Manang** to acclimate to the altitude. This is highly recommended as many people really start to feel the altitude by this point. Most people take a side trek but I had walked so much the previous days, I didn't see the need.

Day six: We walked the 10km to **Ledtar**, taking a leisure day and waking up at the ripe hour of 7:30am. At this point in the trek, even if one can physically keep walking, ascending more than 500 meters/day can result in altitude sickness.

Even this gain of 660 meters was somewhat ill advised, but we felt alright with it. The night was spent at over 4000 meters.

Day seven: We walked the 11 km to **High Camp**, taking another leisure day and leaving around 8am from Ledtar. The walk to high camp is a steep one, and something I preferred doing in the daylight hours, as many people wake up at 3am to make the trek up from high camp all the way through the pass.

Spending the night at high camp was interesting. We luckily arrived early enough (around 12 noon) to get a space in a shared 3-bed room with ice on the walls from the cold. Ellen and I shared a bed while everyone who

arrived after us had to sleep in the common room and those who arrived after 3pm were turned away.

But it sure was a stunning view from high camp

Day eight: We walked 14km over Thorung Pass to **Mukinath**. No lies; today was difficult. For me, it wasn't the incline -- I'd had plenty of that -- it was the altitude. Thorung La Pass sits at 5416 meters (over 17,700 feet!), and it didn't matter how much acclimatization I had done, I was feeling it.



A teahouse (a long way) between the pass and high camp

Annapurna one, two, three, I've lost count...

I felt like my head might explode and each step I took felt as though I was walking on air. When Ellen came down with similar symptoms after we had already descended quite a bit in the following days, I realized I had been ill that day as well. That's a lot to add on top of the difficulty of ascending that much.

But when I finally reached the pass, adrenaline took over and I was on

cloud nine.

WE MADE IT!!



Epic pose also entirely necessary

Next came a very steep descent. I've always been better with uphill than downhill. My joints are too flexible, as evidenced by a [shoulder surgery](#) I had a few years ago. Downhills are a doozy for my knees.

Day nine: Today was a semi-but-not-really-rest-day on the incredibly bumpy and dusty bus from Mukinath to **Tatopani** (no walking). It is actually possible to get a bus or Jeep from this part of the trek all the way back to Pokhara, but I didn't go quite that far.

I cut out this part of the trek because I did not want to walk along the road, inhaling dust from busses and jeeps. I had found it unpleasant during the first days of the trek and didn't want to experience it anymore.

Instead, the plan was to tack on the Annapurna Base Camp/Sanctuary trek since it had taken a much shorter time than anticipated to knock out the

circuit. I had read it takes anywhere from 16-21 days, but, at our pace and by eliminating 2-3 by bus at the end, we only took nine! We also added three awesome guys to our group whom we had run into a few times over the course of the circuit trek.

Day ten: In order to see Poon Hill, we did the trek from Tatopani to **Ghorepani**, a steep gain of 1600 meters over 18km. There were very few flats, downhills (thankfully for my knees), and anything other than steep inclining stone steps. The occasional friendly goat got me through the sweaty, hot day. It was so endearing to hold my hand under their noses, feel them sniff, then dip their head to let me stroke them. I vowed to one day have a pet goat.

I'll also remember this day as the time when I walked up to find Ellen comforting a little boy who had been chased by a rabid cow. I had heard the screaming as I rounded the corner but had no idea it was due to a 6-year-old running for his life from a cow! Afterwards I said to Ellen, "can you imagine growing up in a place where you have to fear being chased by cows?" It's not commonplace in greater Los Angeles, that's for sure.

Day eleven: The Poon Hill trek is done in the early morning in order to catch the sunrise, with most people leaving around 4am. The trek takes 40 minutes to an hour up even more stone steps. Usually the vista is quite impressive, but we had a hazy day so not much was visible.

I would complain, but I've had unbelievably amazing weather during my travels and still got to see the same mountains from different views, so I sucked it up and kept going.

We then made our way to **Bamboo** via Tadopani to begin the ABC trek.

The other side of the mountain brought much greener, wetter, and quite different trekking than the circuit had. I kept cursing the steep downhill steps followed by equally steep steps up. The final climb down to Bamboo revealed a set my knees just didn't want to handle anymore. The colorful string of expletives I let off when I encountered them was some of my best work. It's a pity nobody was around to hear it, as my friends had already made it to the tea house 10 or so minutes earlier.

Day twelve: We walked 12 km with a nearly 2000-meter gain to **Annapurna Base Camp**. Normally this would be completely ill advised due to the altitude gain, but we were already acclimated from Thorung La pass, a good 1200 meters higher, and therefore had no issues.

The biggest difference with this trek was the amount of rain encountered. On the circuit we didn't get any, but come 11am or so on the base camp trail, rains pelted us on the trail and mists rolled in.

Base camp in the distance

Hopefully this will be clear in the morning!

Day thirteen: Unlike the circuit, the base camp trek goes up and then back down the same path. We awoke in time for the sunrise, which cleared up and provided some truly beautiful views of the mountains.

Then we walked 17 km to back to **Chomrong**, descending over 2100 meters through rain, mud, and another steep set of downward stone steps.

Day fourteen: This was the final day. We walked 12 km to just beyond **Kimche** where we caught a bus back to **Pokhara**. One can continue onwards another few hours or so to finish the trek, but we'd had about enough after 14 days!

As for costs, without a guide things become much cheaper and you're much freer to set your own schedule. I averaged \$21/day, though it's possible to spend less if you don't have a crippling chai masala tea addiction, which probably added \$3-\$4 per day to my overall bill. The busses are also pretty expensive, so if it is all done on foot, you can avoid those costs as well.

Both the Annapurna circuit and base camp/sanctuary treks were amazing, and different enough from each other to make it very much worth tacking on base camp at the end of the circuit. If you have the time, I highly recommend doing both. If I had to choose one over the other, however, I'd go with the circuit. The people, views, and experience were just magical.

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