

TOP

of the world

TREKKING FROM KATHMANDU AND ALONG THE ANnapurna CIRCUIT IN NEPAL, ANDY WASLEY HAD NEVER FELT CLOSER TO HEAVEN – AND HE ALSO GOT ENGAGED ON THE WAY



UPPER MUSTANG SEEN AT DAWN
FROM NEAR THORONG LA

The tiny Himalayan country of Nepal is well on its way towards becoming a destination of choice for LGBT tourists. In 2007 a Supreme Court ruling forced anti-gay laws off the statute books and ordered the government to work towards implementing equal marriage. Nepal isn't quite there yet, but a leading gay lawmaker, Sunil Babu Pant, has made it his mission to attract gay people to the country through his Pink Mountains travel company (pinkmountaintravels.com).

It's certainly worth making the journey. Last November I popped the question to my boyfriend following an arduous trek along the Annapurna Circuit high in the Nepalese Himalayas. After two weeks surrounded by pristine, paper-white peaks soaring into powder-blue skies, even something as wonderful as our engagement now seems almost secondary to the adventure that went before it.

Varying in length between 100 and 150 miles (depending on where you start and finish), the

Annapurna Circuit takes in some of Nepal's most stunning mountain scenery and one of the highest points to which it's possible to trek without climbing gear. We travelled in November, after the main tourist season and before snow and ice make the higher parts of the trek more technically challenging. It's possible to do the Circuit solo using a good travel guide (we took the superb Lonely Planet guide). Better still, a Sherpa and porter – paid a proper living wage through an ethical travel company like ►



GANGAPURNA SEEN FROM
HIGH CAMP ON THE
ANNAPURNA TRAIL



ANDY AND FIANCÉ TOM



STATUE OF BUDDHA DRAPED WITH
GARLANDS AT THE BOUDHANATH
TEMPLE IN KATHMANDU

WAY TO GO

HOTELS

Hotel Manaslu
230 Hotel Marg
Lazimpat, Kathmandu
hotelmanaslu.com

Hotel Barahi
Lakeside, Pokhara
barahi.com

EATING – KATHMANDU

Jatra Café and Bar
Thamel, Kathmandu
facebook.com/pages/Jatra-Cafe-Bar

Yangling Tibetan restaurant
Saath Ghumti, Thamel, Kathmandu
kathmandu.im/yangling-tibetan-restaurant

Rum Noodle Trekkers' Bar
Amrit Marg, Kathmandu
therumdoodle.com

EATING – POKHARA

Moondance Restaurant
Central Lakeside-6, Pokhara
moondancepokhara.com

Olive Café
Lakeside Road, Pokhara

Caffe Concerto
Lakeside Road, Pokhara

TOURIST INFO

welcomenepal.com

GAY INFO

Pink Mountain Travels
pinkmountaintravels.com

Blue Diamond Society
bds.org.np

Nepal Pride coincides each year with the Nepali "Festival of Cows", Gai Jatra. As a religious festival based on the lunar cycle, Gai Jatra's date changes each year – follow the Blue Diamond Society for details of the 2015 event.

“Kathmandu is a place where religion, art and history are palpably part of everyday life”

Pink Mountains – will provide company, navigation and knowledgeable chat about the region's history and geography.

We started our trip in Nepal's ancient capital, Kathmandu. Surprisingly modern in some respects – particularly in its cuisine, with bars like Jatra serving traditional food with modern jazz and excellent cocktails – Kathmandu is also a place where religion, art and history are palpably part of everyday life. Ancient temples and shrines adorn the capital's teeming back streets, where Hindus and Buddhists worship

and live peacefully side by side. Nowhere is this Hindu-Buddhist culture more visible than at the city's two great temples, Swayambhunath and Boudhanath.

Even for a committed atheist these temples can inspire an appreciation for Nepal's religious culture. Beneath multicoloured prayer flags fluttering in Kathmandu's smoky breeze, Hindus venerate candlewax-coated holy shrines alongside orange-clad Buddhist monks chanting mantras and turning prayer wheels. At the temples' hearts hundreds of people swirl

clockwise around the central stupas: immense, dazzling white domes streaked with orange saffron water, topped with enormous golden cubes whose painted Buddha eyes gaze benevolently towards the distant mountains.

A good tour company will lay on a private jeep to take you from Kathmandu to your starting point for the Annapurna Circuit – a fine, if bumpy, way to see the country, and much less stressful than making the journey in one of Nepal's notoriously cramped and accident-prone public buses. We started our trek at a tea house

in Bhulbhule, a tiny settlement at the base of towering cliffs, dark green with lush ferns and trees. Tea houses provide trekkers with accommodation, food and boiled water. Their never-ending supply of spicy masala tea and momos – Nepal's ubiquitous steamed dumplings – will help while away the nighttime hours with fellow trekkers. If you're lucky you might even find a hot shower, but this is a trek where you should be prepared for wet-wipe hygiene.

For much of the early part of the Annapurna Circuit the Kudi and Marsyangdi rivers roar

close at hand. Here and there wooden or rope bridges crisscross deep gorges and wide valleys surrounded by the serrated peaks of Manaslu Himal, Annapurna and Gangapurna. Prayer walls and prayer flags by the roadside, and the pungent smell of wood smoke from burnt offerings in tiny villages, are regular reminders of the region's deep attachments to Buddhism and older animist beliefs. Here the mountains are gods.

Some trekkers find it hard to adapt to the thinness of the air as the Circuit winds higher through alpine meadows and misty cloud forests.

Most guides advise you to stop for a full day at Manang, a strip town 3,500m above sea level, where yaks thunder up and down the main street or are served as steaks sizzling on cast-iron platters. When you reach Thorong La – at 5,416m the route's highest and coldest point – eight to ten days after setting off, you'll be grateful for every spare second you take to get used to the altitude.

By the time we reached Thorong La we were crunching through fresh snow under starlit early morning skies, our breath billowing dense and ▶



YAKS IN THE MOUNTAIN
NEAR GANGAPURNA



CONTEMPLATIVE MONK NEAR
THE BOUDHANATH TEMPLE



PRAYER FLAGS FLUTTER FROM
THE BOUDHANATH TEMPLE

“By the time we reached Thorong La we were crunching through fresh snow under starlit early morning skies, our breath billowing dense and white in the freezing air”

white in the freezing air (an early start here is both essential and magical). After a much-needed break in the tiny teahouse atop Thorong La, the long walk down to Muktinah is tiring and long. Walking poles, available at small shops in Manang and elsewhere, will help make the descent into the Martian landscape of Upper Mustang considerably easier, allowing you to take in the scenery and congratulate yourself on reaching your goal.

Most Annapurna Circuit trekkers choose to end their journey in Pokhara. This laidback

lakeside city can be reached by a flight from tiny Jomsom airport, a bus ride away from Muktinah. Be prepared for another jeep or bus journey from Jomsom if the airlines can't fly (a reasonably common occurrence in the region's windswept mountain passes). If you do find yourself bumping along cratered Himalayan roads, consider the relaxation that awaits you in Nepal's bona fide pleasure resort.

It was in Pokhara that I asked my partner to marry me – and where we spent a morning paragliding alongside eagles before dining at

the lakeside in warm afternoon sunshine. In a country like Nepal, experiences like this compete to count as the trip's greatest memory. Mulling over our two-week adventure between sips of hot yak butter tea in Kathmandu's superb Yangling restaurant, I couldn't identify any memory finer than that final, bitterly cold early morning trek up to Thorong La. Far from Kathmandu's glittering temples, high above the Annapurna Circuit's warm tea houses and plunging gorges, it felt as close to heaven as I've ever been. ●