

# Sublime connections

As exciting as big cities and luxury hotels can be, there's a different sort of thrill to be found in their more modest counterparts

formed that the trek is mostly dominated by Tamang settlements. "The word Tamang literally translates to horse riders in the Tibetan language and are known for their drinking culture," shared Gupta. While the horse riding spirit seems to have long been forgotten, the drinking culture is still pretty apparent. Most of the households prepare local alcohol, and it's usually the middle-aged and old women who prepare it. While trekking through the route one is sure to come across a lot of women smoking cigarettes, sitting beside the fire and overlooking the two heating pots — *hanshi*, an earthen pot and *poshi*, a copper one stacked on top of it.

The women usually fill these local alcohol in discarded carbonated drink bottles, stack them all up in their doko and carry them on their backs to sell at nearby bazaars.

Settlements get sparse after passing through the small village of Thanchok at 1,800m, the highest point of the trek. As we went through the pine forests, the only sound we could hear was that of our footsteps — breaking twigs and stepping over the fallen dry leaves. There were a few huts along the way, yet they have all remained abandoned since the inhabitants fled the area during the Maoist insurgency. Currently, they act as resting places for weary travellers.

On a bright clear day, we would have been blessed with the views of Gaurishankar, Langtang and Ganesh mountain ranges, but thanks to the dark dismal clouds that hung above our heads for the better half of the trip, we were sadly ripped off of the mountain sceneries. But, we were more than compensated for the lack of views after a brief snowfall in some places of the Kathmandu Valley the following morning that had blanketed the hill tops and had people sharing photos all over social media.

## Living like a local

When it comes to homestays, many people tend to think of lesser



Indeshwor Temple



A woman making local alcohol in *hanshi* and *poshi*

amenities — squat toilets instead of western ones and a bucket baths instead of hot showers. However, at our host, Nirmaya Shrestha's home, much of these facilities are quite available.

There are around 17 homestays scattered around in Panauti each one of them coordinated by Community Homestay Network (CHN), a CSR initiative of Royal Mountain Travel and Panauti Community Home Stay. Ever since their inception, the goal of the homestay network has been, as Shiva Dhakal, Managing Director at Royal Mountain Travel puts it, to empower the women of the community. Today, the network of homestays extends to over 17 districts of Nepal and

it all began with a single house and a simple idea. Shila Amatya had thought of entertaining foreign guests at her humble abode in Panauti. "My husband, at the time, was working as a guide for Royal Mountain Travel and that is how I came to meet Shiva Dhakal," said Amatya. "What started with just a single home has today spread not only across Panauti, but to different parts of the country."

The idea was not only to provide food to eat and a room to sleep but also help tourists get the essence of local life beyond the famous sites of the historic town. Nirmaya and her daughter Anita proved to be wonderful hosts. Not only did they ensure our comfortable stay, but Anita even accompanied us around town. She is fluent in English and is a good enough guide to show any newcomer around Panauti. "As a result of CHN, many local women have been given English speaking lessons while training them in maintaining hygienic and comfortable standards for a traveller's stay," informed Anita.

Currently, the community homestay network has been providing Dhime (drum) classes and Anita even took us there where we watched her and 10 other young women play the said instrument while they referred to the notations laid out on the white board by their instructor, Milan Shrestha.

In Panauti, more than 17 families are involved in the homestay community, and the money the guests pay in return for the hospitality doesn't only go to the family they stay with but 20 per cent of it goes for the community that helps in carrying out training sessions like Anita's Dhime class or the English speaking lessons. The homestay network has allowed young women like Anita and even mothers like Nirmaya to become breadwinners in their families.

cuit and Everest Base Camp, the 10-km hike from Sanga to Panauti might seem like a walk in the park. Nonetheless, the route, dubbed as the Panauti Community Hike, has got a lot to offer even in its short span of a time and distance, with its fair share of steep up-hills and gruelling down-hills, varying sceneries and diverse terrains that pass through Tamang settlements and even dense pine forests.

Our guide Ashish Gupta from Royal Mountain Travel, the company responsible for hosting the trek, accompanied us on our hike. He in-



A view of Chamkharka, on the way to Panauti, via the alternative trail

Photos: Ranjan Shakya / THT

Shaurya Kshatri  
Kavrepalanchok

Walking around towns and Villages and interacting with the indigenous inhabitants offer slower rhythms to life that travellers can easily adjust to and become part of even if it only means for no more than a couple of days. Perhaps the greatest reward of visiting a smaller-scale destination and then staying with a local is that it offers a stronger chance of connecting with people who call those places their home. One such destination is, without any doubt, the quaint historic town of Panauti in Kavrepalanchok district, its network of homestays and the alternative trail that leads up to it.

## Off-the-beaten track

Just a little over 30km Southeast of Kathmandu, Panauti is easily accessible within a matter of an hour-and-a-half by means of public bus. But where's the fun in that when you can take a slightly more demanding yet remarkably picturesque route through a four-hour-long alternative hiking trail?

For the more seasoned trekkers who have conquered ambitious trails the likes of Annapurna Cir-

# Vacationing on bicycles

Himalayan News Service  
Kathmandu

What would you want to do during a break of a few months? Probably not many of us have as adventurous a dream as

that of two German teens Marian Villing and Gerrit Ludwig. The 18-year-olds from Borken, Germany, who have just graduated school, embarked on a bicycle journey to travel across the world five months ago. They have a break of eight months and they aim to travel to as many places as they can on their bicycles before their vacation comes to an end.

The journey initially began with a group of four forming the 'Chaotic Cycling Club' — they made the plan of cycling across half the globe. This was planned a few weeks before they actually set on their bicycle adventure.



Marian Villing



Photos: Nishant S Gurung / THT



Gerrit Ludwig

But the other two quit midway "due to exhaustion and homesickness" informed Villing and Ludwig. However, these two friends aim to continue their "so far smooth bicycle journey" for the en-

tire eight months. They say they love travelling and had been using cycle as their medium of transportation back home.

They have been cycling across the world on their VFS Fahrradmanufaktur Tx 400 cycles carrying nothing with them except for a few essentials like backpack, clothes, a tent, and power bank.

Travelling is not easy in the sense that one needs money to support the expenses, and these teens are being funded by their

parents. They have a budget of 10 euros per day. And Villing adds that "choosing bicycle to travel has made their trip all the more economic".

So, is 10 euros a day sufficient for the two? "We went over our budget in Europe but the Asian countries have treated us well as our expense has always been below our budget in Asia," Villing added.

Starting from Borken in Germany, they cycled to Switzerland, France, Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Montenegro, Turkey, Dubai before arriving in Nepal, as per Ludwig. In all these months, they have "tried to escape the winter" so that they can have a comfortable ride.

So, how has their experience been so far? Ludwig continued, "We found Iran to be the most hospitable country so far as we never had any problem in finding a place to stay. Once we told the locals about our journey, they would invite us to stay at their homes."

Inspired by their story the Dwarika's Hotel in Battispatali hosted the duo during their brief stay in the Capital. From Nepal, they are headed to India — their India journey will begin as soon as Ludwig's cycle gets fixed.

"I got into a bike accident here (in Kathmandu) — the forks have bent and that need to be repaired," he shared. Other than such minor mishaps, the duo have been fortunate enough not to encounter major problems.

"So far we have not faced such problems as luck seems to favour us. Our minds have been broadened by the people we have met on our way and the places we have been to," stated Villing, whose bike also broke twice during the trip.

When asked if they feel homesick, Villing expressed, "It all comes down to what you choose — an amazing travel experience or your home. We only have three more months of our vacation left, so we want to make the most of it even though we dearly miss our friends and family."

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