Off the beaten trek

Get away from Kathmandu and the crowded trekking trails, flee to Manaslu this Christmas and have the Budi Gandaki Valley to yourself. Friendly people along the way, like this sahu in Machha Khola (left), wait to welcome you. Even though Larkya Pass may be too cold to cross, here are five reasons to hit the Manaslu Trail:

• Mountains: The two-horned massif of Manaslu and its magnificent companions.

• Villages: The further you go, the more remarkable the settlements.

• Forests: It’s easy to not see the trees for the forest sometimes.

• The Unbeaten Trail: Forget the jams of Everest and Annapurna.

• Kathmandu: So you can get a breather.

Read more p12-13

Full gallery and trekking tips nepalitimes.com

Editorial p2
When is Wen coming again?

The Fourth Force p3 by Anurag Acharya

Justice is peace p11 by Rubeena Mahato
some things become more newsworthy when they don't happen than when they do. That seems to be true for the visit of Chinese premier Wen Jiabao's visit to Nepal, which was apparently scheduled for next week.

Foreign Minister Narayan Kaji Shrestha tried to judge it on Tuesday by saying the dates had never been fixed. The Chinese side played down the cancellation, saying Premier Wen had other plans and that a new date would soon be announced.

The visit, and its cancellation at the last moment, has set off intense speculation about Nepal's unceremonious being squeezed by a shift in geopolitical tectonics in the region. There has been a more aggressive US posture following the APEC conclaves in Honolulu and the ASEAN Summit in Bali in November. US President Barak Obama's commitment at both meetings that America would “remain engaged” in the Pacific in the 21st century have been seen by many as a response to China's growing economic and military clout. Obama's decision to upgrade US troop presence in Australia and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's reassurances of military ties with troop presence in Australia and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s reassurances of military ties with Burma, India and Malacca Straits which serve as vulnerable bottlenecks for its oil, mineral supplies and exports. When Chinese leaders look at a map of the mainland and see Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Burma, India and Kyrgyzstan, they must have a feeling of being encircled.

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However, it would be stretching the point too thin to be predicting a Sino-Indian ‘cold war’ over Nepal. China is now too wined and dined by the two countries have deliberately kept their border disputes in deep freeze. The last thing they want is for Nepal to flare up and seriously destabilise the Himalayan rimland.

There is a convergence of interests between Beijing and New Delhi over Nepal: both want the politics to be more stable and predictable.

Premier Wen’s main objective in Kathmandu would have been to cement his country’s misgivings about Nepal being used as a springboard for free Tibet activities. The Chinese are wary of American and European support for the Tibetan cause, and the pressure they bring to bear on Nepal to go easy on refugees and protests. The Chinese have become even more sensitive after the recent spate of self-immolation of monks in China, and it must have been fear of a similar burning in Kathmandu during his visit in full glare of the international media that factored into the cancellation of Wen’s visit.

We in Nepal have enough problems to sort out without also being a regional flashpoint over Tibet. It would befoolish the Americans and Europeans to understand that Nepal can hardly be expected to stand up to China when they are going to Beijing begging for cash to bail out their economies.

China, for its part should realise that Nepal is not the cause but the effect of its crackdowns in Tibet. Addressing the genuine aspirations of the Tibetan people for cultural preservation and autonomy would be a vastly superior strategy than beating and torturing monks and nuns.

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The Maoist-led government made progress in the peace and constitution process in its first 100 days, but the honeymoon was overshadowed by corruption of epic proportions involving ministers and law makers.

Barring their notorious role in pardoning their own war criminals and hijacking the state exchequer, the Maoists have done fairly well. Despite pressure from within, Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai ensured that integration went ahead and got the State Restructuring Commission up and running.

Alas, the same can’t be said about his Madhesi partners in government. They may not have a monopoly on malfeasance, but the energy with which they have been emptying the state coffers, sheltering crooks and demanding payoffs for transfers is breath-taking. These are the same leaders who once gave passionate speeches about how they would work to right the historical wrongs against the Madhesi people.

Despite a Madhesi minister holding the powerful home and defense portfolios, the law and order situation in the Tarai has gone from bad to worse, thanks to gangster-style micro-managing. From kickbacks in irrigation projects to transfers of police personnel and tax officers, Madhesi leaders in this government have reinforced the stereotype of what everyone expected of them. Public dissatisfaction with their own leaders in the Madhes itself is at an all time high.

Suddenly, the leaders are rushing down for unscheduled visits to Biratnagar, Birganj and Janakpur and, in a bizarre mix of irony and idiocy, calling on their own government to implement agreements which they had forgotten for the last 100 days.

The electoral games have begun, and the Madhesi parties are well aware that the three main parties are trying to steal away their votes in the Tarai. The Madhesi Front, which claims to be the ‘Fourth Force’ of Nepali politics, however, has been shocked by its diminishing clout in New Delhi and dipping popularity in the plains.

In their meeting with PM Baburam Bhattarai and Pushpa Kamal Dahal this week, the Madhesi Front warned the leaders of “the next Madhes movement”. But with credibility in the Madhes at an all time low, this is an attempt to rouse a thoroughly disillusioned constituency back home. A Front meeting this week degenerated into ugly blame throwing, and an insider told us the leaders were especially critical of Home Minister Bijay Kumar Gachchedar and blamed him for disgracing Madhesi politics. They instructed Gachchedar to either do what he was sent to do or step down.

Sadbhavana leader, Health Minister Rajendra Mahato, admitted on BBC Nepali this week that the performance of his colleagues was below par. “We will have no face to show to the Madhesi people if we fail to deliver even from a government in which Madhesis hold all major portfolios,” he said. The corruption cases against JP Gupta and Hridyesh Tripathi, the more articulate among Madhesi leaders, has left the Madhesi politics at the mercy of those that are neither doing any favour to their own party nor the constituency they represent.

The Madhesi parties have wasted precious time bargaining for something that their own people have rejected. They must now listen to them before raising the ‘One Madhes’ slogan. The Madhes movement was one for inclusion and dignity, not for an exclusive identity. The demand for inclusion of Madhesis in centers of power: politics, bureaucracy and the army calls for a closer integration of the region and its people into the national mainstream.

In a recent tv interview, JP Gupta said that more than anyone else, the people of Madhes would be the biggest losers if the constitution is not drafted. Let’s hope that the Madhes are looking to do just that in the coming days.

The Fourth Force
Diminishing clout and dipping popularity sparks a blame game among Madhesi parties
Nepal posts one of highest growth rates in mobile phones for TeliaSonera

STOCKHOLM—Many in Nepal know that Ncell used to be Metro Mobile, but what they probably don’t know is that it is part of a multinational company that is the sixth largest service provider in Europe, TeliaSonera.

Telia is from Finland, the land of Nokia, and Sonera is from Sweden, where the world’s first mobile phone was installed in a car in 1956. The two countries have been at the forefront of innovation in mobile telephony ever since. TeliaSonera this year introduced mobile broadband 4G service in Sweden because it said the rest of the world was too slow to adopt the data service.

“We want to be first,” TeliaSonera’s VP for System’s Development, Tommy Ljunggren, told Nepali Times in Stockholm recently. “We want to pioneer the next generation of networks in Eurasia.”

Among the firsts that TeliaSonera boasts of in its promotional materials and website is that last year it installed “the world’s highest 3G” at the base of Mt Everest in Nepal. In fact, among the 18 countries where it operates through subsidiaries or partners in Europe and Asia, TeliaSonera’s Nepal operation has registered the highest growth rate.

“Growth in Nepal has really surprised me,” admits Teri Kiviinna, president of TeliaSonera’s Eurasian operations. “I think we got the timing right. And if the political situation stabilises Nepal’s location between India and China will mean it has fantastic potential for growth in the telecom sector.”

Ncell has now overtaken Nepal Telecom (NT) to become the largest provider in Nepal. The company is investing $100 million in new technology every year, and is even providing equipment upgrades to NT so as to remove the gateway bottlenecks that affected connectivity.

Says Kiviinna: “Nepal is very important for us right now, we have doubled year-to-year revenue in the third quarter of 2011, and we did it by having a good network, good quality and good coverage.”

However, not everything is smooth sailing in Kathmandu. TeliaSonera has a ‘clean company’ policy and this can affect day-to-day functioning when corruption, extortion and erratic government policy are the norm. Parliament’s Public Accounts Committee this week is retroactively scrutinizing the 3G license, so the company has put its plans to upgrade to 4G on hold. Vendors selling SIM cards are resisting attempts by Ncell to stop overcharging.

Although the mobile penetration rate in Nepal is exponentially increasing, average revenue per customer is much lower than in other countries whereas investment is three times higher because of terrain, provisioning base stations for power cuts and lack of access. In November Ncell said it had its first day with no reported defects in its network.

For Ncell’s Pasi Kostinen it is a daily struggle to battle the bureaucracy and red tape to get permits, visas for expat staff or clearing equipment through customs. “We appreciate there are procedures, but it takes so much time sometimes it is frustrating,” he says. “it requires a lot of patience in Nepal, but we have the patience because we believe this country has so much opportunity.”

The biggest headache has been the connectivity problem between Ncell and NT. “Our customers think it is our fault,” says Kostinen, although he adds connections have become smoother in the past two weeks. Ncell is also insisting on 4G, which is investing $100 million in new technology every year, and is even providing equipment upgrades to NT so as to remove the gateway bottlenecks that affected connectivity.

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“We are now building capacity”

A complaint one hears a lot from mobile phone users is poor connectivity how are you trying to resolve the gateways with Nepal Telecom? We have had a fruitful discussion with NTA resulting which, in past couple of weeks they have offered enough capacity for Ncell customers to reach their network even during peak hours. That used to be a big problem earlier. We are optimistic that the positive situation continues.

As part of a larger international company that has a “clean company” policy, how difficult is it to do business in Nepal as a foreign investor in the current business environment? Our values come from some of the least corrupt countries in the world such as Sweden and Finland. We have not provided anyone with any undue favors in monetary or other terms to get things done till date and the same will continue in future. We do get some requests in the countrywide when building towers, but if the clear procedures are not accepted, we just back off and people will not get their connectivity. I am glad that in many cases, the people have chosen to get the tower instead.
In the dark
The Rastra Bank’s interest rate relief for hydro developers may be too little too late

Last week, Nepal Rastra Bank announced refinancing facilities for hydropower projects of up to 25 MW, under which the central bank agreed to provide banks and financial institutions credit at an interest rate of 6.5 per cent. The institutions will have to re-lend the amount at interest rate not more than 10 per cent to hydropower developers. For this facility, the banks have been sent a directive to approach the central bank with loan demands placed by such developers.

This is a positive move on the central bank’s side to provide relief to the ailing industry, hit by soaring costs. The fixed tariff rates in the power purchase agreement and ever increasing cost of funds have been troubling hydropower project developers and investors. Projects that provided an interest spread of 3.5 per cent to encourage financial institutions to invest in the sector, fixing the ceiling for interest rate at 10 per cent. Considering the need of the hour, the interest spread is perhaps too high. The financial sector has experienced a surge in liquidity and the overall interest rate has slightly decreased. In the last five months, commercial banks alone have collected an additional Rs 56 billion, but only Rs 21 billion have been invested in this period.

The response from the central bank has been received well, but this move is perhaps too little too late to fix the crisis. First of all, the facility has been provided for only six months, which is too short compared to the gestation period of hydropower projects. Hydropower developers argue that a special provision has to be made which will increase the time frame to at least three years. Secondly, the central bank has alone the principal amount of their loans. Projects, including Tama Kosi, Mohli and Mai Khola, had formally applied to the Ministry of Energy to be declared ‘sick’ and to be provided relief packages such as relaxation in bank rates.

The domestic demand for electricity has crossed 1,000MW, and the country has installed capacity of 70 per cent of the demand. During winter, these plants generate only a third of their capacity. As we head to daily 17 hours of power cuts, investing in hydropower projects and easing hurdles of the developers should be top priority if we want to shed our load-shedding hours. Otherwise we will still be in the dark 10 years from now.
Despite its relatively small size, Nepal is so strategically located on the boundary between Asia’s two eco-biological domains that nearly one in every ten bird species in the world is found here.

Altitude variation in the Himalaya and its climate diversity means that the country has 867 species of birds: more than the entire North American continent.

Bird watchers from all over the world throng to Nepal, but tourism experts say we haven’t even scratched the surface of its potential. Hum Bahadur Gurung of Bird Conservation Nepal (BCN) says: “Unlike trekkers who pass through villages and spend less, birdwatchers linger longer in a place and usually spend more.”

Birdwatching guides also earn more than trekking guides, and can generate employment and income for local nature clubs. Bird watching is not just limited to tourists, every year BCN organizes bird watching trips where locals, students, hikers and bird lovers walk trails to spot birds. Jyotendra Thakuri, the Conservation Officer at BCN says students from Tribhuvan University and Kathmandu University who want to pursue a career in environmental science are particularly interested as are locals who aim to be bird watching guides.

Yet all is not well in the bird world. Nepal has 27 Important Bird Areas (IBA) and there are 149 species in the endangered list. Climate change has forced birds to change their migratory patterns and the destruction of wetlands and pollution of rivers and lakes has led to dwindling bird populations (see overleaf). As birds can fly over vast distances to settle where they find most suitable changes in weather cause them to shorten their migratory routes and confine themselves to smaller ranges.

The Bishbill which once roosted on the banks of Trisuli are now spotted as high as Langtang Valley. Studies carried out by Birds International predict how climate change may affect the migratory paths of birds. In Nepal alone there are nearly 40,000 points where migratory birds regularly make stopovers. By factoring changes in weather and habitat, researchers have been able to predict how these locations may change in the next 25 years.

Birds play an important role in the ecosystem by controlling the insect population and aiding in seed dispersal, and Hum Gurung feels it is necessary to plan ahead. He says: “We need to not just conserve our current bird population but also be able to adapt to future changes due to climate change.”

Climate change is forcing birds to alter their migration routes across the Himalaya.
Nepal’s wetlands are not only home to many unique species of flora and fauna but also serve as a stopover point in the routes of many migratory birds. Flying from as far as Spain and Siberia these birds use the wetlands of Nepal to gather their energy before setting off again for India, Africa or Southeast Asia. Implemented by the Ministry of Forests and Soil, the Conservation and Sustainable use of Wetlands in Nepal (CSUWN) project aims to address these problems and raise awareness of the importance of wetlands.

Project manager Top B Khatri says, “Wetlands are important stepping stones for migratory birds, but we need to preserve them not just for birds but for the whole ecosystem.” However, the destruction of wetlands due to drainage, pollution and commercial fishing has severely affected the populations of migratory birds that make places like Kosi Tappu Wildlife Reserve famous. While once nationally protected birds like the Sarus Crane was easily spotted in the wetlands, today their numbers have drastically reduced.

Most preservation institutions agree the key to saving the wetlands begins with changing the mindset of the people in power. According to Khatri, the project aims to do just that, “We are working on three major areas: coordinating various rules to make a binding policy for all. So, we are revising wetland policy to make a policy for all ministries.”

Brittany Searle
**EVENTS**

*Life in the Sacred Himalayan Landscape, WWF presents breathtaking images of the Himalayan region and its the people.* Until 17 December, 11am to 5pm, Shobhda Art Gallery

*Hamro Shorts, enjoy the screening of short independent movies in this chilly December weather.* Till 29 December, Food Court, Times Square Mall, Durbar Marg

*Tavern Tales, Quixote’s Cove presents Thomas K. Shor in conversation with Kunda Dixit on his latest book, Step Away from Paradise.* 18 December, 3.30 pm, Café Chwens, Krishna Galli, Patan

*Boudha Street Festival, organised by Yuva Sansthan the festival features live music, fashion shows and food stalls.* 17 December, 10am onwards, Boudha, 9808525924, 9807138036

*KJC Winter Camp 2012, ten days winter camp for children between the ages of 6 and 13 organised by Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory.* 2 January to 13 January, 2012

**DINING**

*Shiamak Davar Dance Fiesta, concluding dance concert presented by the second batch of Shiamak Davar Workshop dancers.* 21 December, 980101101

*Art Workshop, learn how to paint and draw under the guidance of Neera Joshi Pradhan.* 18, 20 and 24 December, Park Gallery, Pulchowk, www.studiolopes.com

**MUSIC**

*Live Music at Jazzabella Café, Every Wednesday and Friday 6pm onwards, Jazzabella café, Jhamsikhel, Patan.* 2144015

**GETAWAYS**

*Holiday at Grand Norling Hotel, Gokarna, one night and two days at Rs 4500 and two nights and three days at Rs 7000.* Call 477494

*The Last Resort, be a part of the Bungy or Swing Jump Event over the Bhote Koshi river 160 metres below or mountain bike to the Tibetan border.* Fees: Rs 2700 per person for one day or Rs 4500 per person for an overnight stay, valid until December, The Last Resort Sales Office, Mandala Street, Thamel, 4700525

**SHIAMAK**

*Shiamak Davar Dance Fiesta, concluding dance concert presented by the second batch of Shiamak Davar Workshop dancers.* 21 December, 980101101

**ARTS & CULTURE**

*Step Away from Paradise* 8

**PICTURE FAIR**

*Black Pepper Café & Pub, cosmopolitan dining and drinking in a traditional style courtyard, try the apple sauce pork chops and enjoy the good service.* Kopundale Height, Lalitpur, 5521897, 5536926

*Ghangri Café, a quiet place with comfortable sofas and charming courtyard, perfect for those sunny afternoons. Although famous for their open sea views, they offer a few other great dishes as well.* Pulchowk

*KUSOM GigExpress, join performances by bands like Mukti n Revival and X Mantra in the annual music festival. Tickets at Rs 150.* 17 December, 12.30 pm to 7.30 pm, Fun Park, Bhrikuti Mandap, for tickets call 9841594926, 9841516212

*Baja Gaja, playing live every Tuesday 7.30 pm onwards at Mosksh, Pulchowk, Call 5526212

*Voiceless Scream Nepal, best of underground bands featuring Satanic Sabotage and Psychic Tower Nabi.* 17 December, 11am onwards, Neon Pub, Thamel

*Higher Grounds, enjoy the rich Oreo Milky with comfort, Kumaripati.*

**DINING**

*Kchingapakhtari*

*Lazy Gringo, one of the best places in town to sample Mexican cuisine. Fine relills of refreshing lemonades won our hearts, but the food is mighty fine...* Jwalaikhet

*Upstairs Café, provides customers with a delicious range of Vietnamese cuisine. Mahabadjur, near the US embassy.*

*Attic, newly transformed lounge and bar ideal for Friday night cocktails before hitting the dance floor. Utara Dhoka, Lazimpat, 9841614749*

*New Dish, you will be in for a treat here as it serves one of the best pork momo in town.*

**THE ART OF PHILANTHROPY**

*The Help Nepal Network (HeNN), a charity which channels donations from overseas Nepalis for health and education projects in rural Nepal is organizing a unique auction of art work as a fund raiser for its activities. The first Art for Philanthropy event will auction paintings by Kapil Mani Dixit on 20 December at 3.30pm Moksh in Jhamsikhel.*

*Proceeds will go to renovate and upgrade the buildings of the Adarsha Secondary School in Argakhanchi. Established in 1955, the school currently has 340 students and 16 teachers but the buildings are overcrowded and in need of repair.*

*The School Management Committee, Centre for Information Technology Nepal, the DCC and VDC have also pledged to support the school.*

*Auction: 20 December at 3.30pm Moksh in Jhamsikhel.*

**PAGE 11**

*Fun Park, 17 December, 12.30 pm to 7.30 pm, Fun Park, Bhrikuti Mandap, for tickets call 9841594926, 9841516212*

*Just Baked, a cozy café with amazing pastries and friendly ambience, Old Bagmati.*

*The Yellow Chili, Sanjeev Kapoor’s restaurant with Indian cuisine and local delicacies. Bluebird Complex, Thapathali.*

*Holiday at Grand Norling Hotel, Gokarna, one night and two days at Rs 4500 and two nights and three days at Rs 7000.* Call 477494

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**The art of philanthropy**

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Window on the Himalaya

just focus on the raw beauty of the mountains, but offers audiences an informative visual experience that addresses the challenges faced by the delicate Himalayan ecosystem.

The exhibition opens with an introduction to life in the Himalayas with pictures that capture the beauty of the mountains, the types of flora and fauna unique to the Himalayan landscape and the people of the mountain whose religion, culture and lifestyle are intertwined with the land.

While the first and second floors feature both majestic and confronting images, the most unique aspect of the exhibition is found on the third floor, where photographs capture the way local people have come together with the WWF to save the land they both love and depend on.

The exhibit acts as a reminder that the mountains are more than just a tourist destination but home to people and wildlife that have been affected by climate change, over-grazing, tourism and poaching.

Pictures showing Mother’s Groups burning waste left behind by pilgrims, communities embracing hydro-electricity and water-smart farming initiatives provide viewers with a stark realisation that the future of the Himalaya is dependent on the support of its local communities.

WWF Program Manager of the Sacred Himalayan Landscape, Roshan Serchan believes that awareness is one of the primary reasons an exhibit of this nature is important. He adds: “The idea of the exhibition is to show the uniqueness and importance of the Himalayan landscape.”

Brittany Searle

‘Window to the Himalayas’ will be featured at the Siddhaatha Art gallery until Sunday December 18. Schools are welcome.

Casa de Cass

its recommended dinner items, however, need much tweaking. The skewered tenderloin was mediocre. Grill marks were faint and the meat, hardly seared. My request for medium-rare ended up well done, tough and a bit dry, and the ‘unique spicy peppercorn sauce’ resembled a marinara sauce.

The sage chicken, bacon-wrapped and topped with cream, was well-cooked but the sauce was unevenly emulsified leaving traceable puddles of butter. Sides to the dishes were uniform: steamed carrots and broccoli, sautéed zucchini and tater tots.

For the price, variation would be appreciated: what about a gratin to the chicken or a garlic mash to the tenderloin? The complimentary mixed green salad with a light herb dressing and blanched almonds are a nice touch.

Desserts vary daily at Cass guaranteeing freshly baked surprises like the pineapple upside-down cake, a warm, heavenly slice of buttery pound cake topped (or rather bottomed) with pineapple slices and a walnut crumble—superb.

With a soundtrack tuned to the likes of the Temper Trap, Cass sounds like a hipster hangout. But its understated, rustic design (real hardwood floors, a chest doubling as a coffee table, bar stools that line the window front, inviting settees and comfortable fauteuils) and prices to match beckon a quality suggestive of a gentleman’s parlor. Bring out the Cubans!

But don’t be intimidated by the cravats and ascots. No matter the agenda, Cass sets up an ideal spot for a coffee date, a lunch meeting or a Russian novel.

Marco Pollo

Escape the UN House, look left and right before crossing and halt just before the Bakery Café
NEWAR DELIGHT: A girl at a rally celebrating the Newar festival, Yomari Purnima, in Thamel on Saturday. On this day, a special steamed delicacy of rice-flour filled with brown cane sugar and sesame seeds is prepared.

WEEKEND WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

FRI | SAT | SUN
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The unseasonably low minimum temperature this week (it dropped down to 2.3 Celsius) on Wednesday in Kathmandu is caused by a high pressure system stationary over north India. This has left us literally high and dry, and cold. Combined with the Indo-Gangetic inversion haze combined with smoke from the annual grass burning season in Chitwan National Park, has filtered the sun bringing down the maximum temperature to below 20 Celsius as well. This trend is not going to change significantly in the coming week. Best bundle up and think of ways to insulate the house and office to conserve energy and reduce the heating bill.

KIRAT CUTIE: A young girl at a gathering on Saturday to celebrate Udhauli, a Kirat festival that marks the beginning of winter, in Nakhipot, Lalitpur.

CHINESE DOLL: A dancer waits for her turn at the 5th China Festival, organised at the Academy Hall on Wednesday. The festival was hosted by the Chinese Embassy.
Justice is peace
War is often only a few miscarriages of justice away

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Nepalis are known for our weak institutional memory. Out of sight means out of mind. Agni Sapkota, Prabhu Sah and Bal Krishna Dhungel are not in the headlines, so they have fizzled out. Just a month ago, it seemed everyone in this country, except understandably the Maoists, wanted a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). People wanted the whereabouts of the disappeared to be made public and the murderers of people like Ujjan Kumar Shrestha to be punished. Today, nobody except the relatives of the victims want the commission. The TRC was, like everything else, just another, the government has no business, the Maoists want to deliberately weaken future commissions to deal with war crimes and ensure that they support its agenda of blanket amnesty. Parties with militant wings, the army, police and the leaders of previous governments are only too happy to let the Maoists take the lead because they also have blood on their hands. It seems, justice which has been delayed for five years will now be denied forever.

This directly enforces the state of impunity in the country. One after another, the government has published orders issued by the Supreme Court. The prime minister is not just protecting convicted criminals, but openly saying individual investigations will derail the peace process. Will it? It is more likely that reconciliation will be harder and justice will be a mirage if human rights abuses during the war are not addressed.

The architects of the war and those who ordered brutal crackdowns want South Africa to be a model and announce a mass amnesty. Every country is unique, and there are 20 other countries that have successfully completed or are working towards truth and reconciliation processes. In some cases, culprits were convicted while some families agreed to forgive perpetrators and some cases were settled with reparations. But invariably, all cases were investigated and aired in public. The guilty had to admit to their crimes and the wrongfulness of their actions was established before they were considered for forgiveness. What the Maoists want here, however, is validation for their violence, especially the heinous crimes committed during the war. This is not reconciliation but betrayal.

There will be no lasting peace without justice for the victims of war. Post-conflict societies have used truth and reconciliation as a way to grieve, heal and move on. We, on the other hand, don’t even want to hear the victims out. War mongers on both sides are so afraid of the truth and the violence they committed on the people, they are blackmailing the nation by saying that justice threatens peace.

Ideally, we should have been able to solve our own issues. We can’t let foreigners manage our peace process forever. It’s not particularly a proud moment when a foreign ambassador writes in the national media pressuring the government regarding human rights. This is what happens when, instead of protecting its own citizens, the state seeks to pardon itself for crimes committed against them. The Maoists are getting the rap because they have the most to hide, but there are known war criminals in the security apparatus as well. It would benefit both sides to push a wishy-washy TRC that pardons all. If this happens, it would forever institutionalise violence and impunity in our society. War is often only a few miscarriages of justice away, and no Nepali wants to go down that road again.
“Hello…Namaste…Hi,” and a nod of the head when gasping up an incline; there seemed no end to the trekkers on the trail. On the other side of the Marsyangdi River, workers drilled into the hill. It would take more than a road to deter trekkers drawn by the lure of the Annapurnas, but we couldn’t help but feel sorry for the Johnny-come-latelies crowding the famous circuit – heading up in the opposite direction to us – oblivious to the 150-kilometre circuit of neighbouring Manaslu we’d just completed. If only they knew.

We didn’t either, to start with. We’d almost missed Manaslu, caught up in a welter of itineraries old and new, when I took a second look at the route linked to the Great Himalaya Trail’s website. We reckoned we could make the circuit in the fortnight available to us, and the rest, as they say, is natural history.

It began with all the dubious joys of the highway. By microbus, bus and jeep, on steadily deteriorating tracks, we passed Gorkha before coming to settle at Soti Khola, where we commenced a classic Nepali trekking circuit – moving from lush, sub-tropical humidity through temperate forests all the way up to barren, icy Himalayan grandeur topping 5,000 metres, and back down again.

As with any self-respecting circuit, this one was a long meditation on a single massif, with many glorious distractions along the way. Manaslu, the eight-highest mountain in the world at 8156m, did not disappoint. From its two-horned appearance on the fifth day of walking, at Syo, it steadily rose out of the lesser peaks surrounding it until it completely dominated the northwestern aspect of the route – unless of course you looked back to admire Himalchuli (7,893m), most impressive in the wide-angle panorama from Syala. The closer we approached, the more impressive the glaciers that sloughed down from these ice giants, despite the extent of their retreat.

The distractions, if one can call them that, comprised the transitions...
through Hindu, Gurung and Tibetan cultures, mirrored by shifts in flora and fauna, that make a ‘typical’ Nepali trek so intriguing. There were the myriad species of butterflies about our feet down low, and a 40-strong herd of blue sheep up high. There were the misty wood-shingled villages thronged with rosy-cheeked children and moody yaks. Thick forests spanning sal to pine. And the waterfalls thundering into the Budigandaki, frozen into glaciers in the thin air as we crossed the Larkya La (5100m) for views of the Annapurna range.

Such a journey as this is much more than the sum of its parts. It’s about the elongated moments of wellbeing, so rare in our jumbled-up urban lives, that become commonplace when there is nothing but nature around you. Walking. Talking. Using all five senses. The rasp of a tree trunk under my fingertips and the morning sun on the nape of my neck; the shrill call of a bird, the laughter of a child, and the mournful clunking of belled yaks grazing in the night; the damp musk rising from a leaf-strewn forest path and the piney chill of the mountain air; even the taste of plain, smoky dalbhat, cloven in two by the heart-stopping fire of a green chilli.

Thanks to the intrusions of the road next door, and the overflow from Everest, we were not the only people discovering Manaslu. With 2,322 foreign trekkers in 2010, up from 344 in 1995, Manaslu is set to become the next trekker’s Mecca. The opportunity is not just for hopeful hoteliers who’ve invested in new stone cottages with plywood partitions, in village after village. Government could help clear the bureaucratic brush that deters trekking agencies from starting business in Manaslu, and the Manaslu Conservation Area Project should rapidly move to regulate prices (Samdo’s Chez Karsang Sans Toilet makes my personal $hitlist), control wood consumption (the sole kerosene depot we saw appears to have been converted into a hotel dining room), and provide the necessary hospitality training for newbie hoteliers. Manaslu will do the rest.

Practicalities

Officially, the Manaslu circuit is still a camping trek, but don’t be fooled by the fake inventories the agencies have to submit for permits. Some teahouses don’t yet have toilets, but things will only get better. A sleeping bag’s still handy.

The circuit runs anti-clockwise from Arughat (east of Gorkha) to Besisahar, but the advent of tracks means one can start from Siddhing and end in Chamje instead, making for a two-week circuit. The trek isn’t especially hard if you’ve had a little experience, but make sure to acclimatise.

www.greathimalayatrail.org/
http://manaslucircuittrek.com/

AROUND MANASLU: Horses graze in the shadow of Manaslu and the Ribung Gomba (above, left); looking back on Samdo and Himalchuli from Larkya Pass (above) and a shepherd carries a kid in a net around his neck.
Chinese premier’s postponed state visit has raised many questions over Nepal–China relationship. Did the Chinese pull out last minute because they were wary of dealing with the Maoist-led government? It is no secret that the Chinese never accepted Nepali Maoists as true followers of Mao Zedong. What’s more, Beijing is known to be unhappy over India’s influence on Maoist leaders, particularly Dahal and Bhattarai. We may never find out the actual cause, but cancellation of Jiaabao’s visit means that Nepal has lost out on lucrative development packages.

Rarely does Nepal get the chance to shine on the world stage, and even when it does, it makes a mess of things. The postponement of Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao’s visit to Nepal has tarnished Nepal’s reputation further. Amid preparations for Premier Wen’s visit, the cancellation announcement has left the government red faced. Sources in government blame political parties who didn’t want the Bhattarai-led government to get credit for the visit and detested the growing friendliness between China and Nepal. When the Madhesi Front threatened to walk out of the coalition government the Chinese side was told this may not be the right time to do deals with an unstable government. Although it is difficult to prove it, this is probably the main cause. At a time when efforts need to be concentrated on constitution drafting and concluding the peace process, such rifts between the parties is unnecessary. Nepal has been the playground of foreign countries, and our leaders have time and again proved to be short-sighted. It’s high time they did something to restore our ailing international reputation.

Yubraj Ghiwire in Jana Aastha, 14 December

The cancellation of a supposedly very important visit by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao this week has raised serious questions about the credibility and competence of Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai. Wen was going to announce major investment and aid worth billions and sign a BIPPA agreement with Nepal. The government itself was publicising all the goodies we were going to get: a new international airport in Pokhara, the West Seti project, railways and the modernisation of Nepal Police. Ordinary Nepalis were bemused to see everything that was supposed to happen, and experts said this signified the added importance China had given to relations with Nepal. Still others said a new ‘cold war’ had started between India and China. The cancellation of such a visit has shocked Nepali officialdom, and has ruined the persona of Prime Minister Bhattarai. It is clear now that it was also the behaviour of Home Minister Bijay Gachchhadar that had made the Chinese suspicious. The Chinese had hinted that they were not getting the necessary cooperation from Gachchhadar about security matters during the visit. Bhattarai has therefore lost a golden opportunity to show his equidistance between India and China, and also his image as a result-oriented prime minister who delivered on promises. Now, it looks like Wen Jiaabao is unlikely to visit Nepal as long as Bhattarai is prime minister.

Ghatana ra Bichar Weekly, 14-20 December

The postponement of Chinese premier Wen Jiaabao’s visit is a diplomatic disaster and it has tarnished Nepal’s image in the international arena. The visit should have been treated with high level of sensitivity. But instead PM Bhattarai prematurely disclosed the date and failed to respect silent diplomacy that the Chinese greatly value. Like Bhattarai, many Nepali leaders in the past have demonstrated their incompetence in diplomacy. And their lack of diplomatic skills becomes most pronounced when trying to strike a balance between two giant neighbours and win their confidence.

It’s time Nepali leaders examined their diplomatic aptitude. They must learn to keep emotions and ideologies out of diplomacy and work on understanding the foreign policy, and internalising norms and practices of the concerned country.

Editorial in Kantipur, 15 December

The news that Chinese premier Wen Jiabao will no longer be visiting Nepal has sent shock waves throughout the nation and political experts and analysts are all scrambling to get to the root of the disaster. PM Bhattarai flouted diplomatic norms by making a unilateral announcement of the definite date played a part in suspending the visit. But news of Tibetan refugees holding protests in Kathmandu was what upset the Chinese the most. China could not trust a country that made a mess by revealing confidential information and one that cannot curb protests with the security of its head of government. The lack of coordination between the PM’s Office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also did not help Nepal’s cause. Speculation will continue for a long time, but the government has an obligation to explain to the public why a visit from a neighbouring country’s prime minister was postponed so abruptly.

Editorial in Annapurna Post, 14 December

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Editorial in Kantipur, 15 December
Busy signal

Interview with Foreign Minister Narayan Kaji Shrestha in Naya Patrika, 14 December

Naya Patrika: Why was the Chinese premier’s visit postponed at the last minute?

Narayan Kaji Shrestha: We had never divulged the exact date of his visit. We were working at a diplomatic level to announce the final date. But the Chinese embassy has informed us that he would not be able to visit this time due to his busy schedule. A new date for his visit will be fixed soon.

But there are reports that the real reason was the government’s inability to guarantee security? Nepal is not the reason for this cancellation. We had made high-level security arrangements for the visit. Even the Chinese ambassador appreciated our preparation.

Will this affect Nepal-China relations?

It will not affect our longstanding relations. The Chinese delegation postponed the visit for internal reasons. So we believe bilateral relations between the two countries and Chinese assistance for Nepal’s development will remain intact.

It is also said that the visit was postponed, because the tenure of this government is uncertain and that the Chinese side is angered by PM Bhattarai unilaterally announcing the date of the visit? The Chinese government keeps out of domestic political developments in Nepal. So that cannot be the reason for the postponement. The PM had only mentioned a tentative date of the visit. The Chinese are keen to take Nepal-China relations to the next level.

The cancellation of the visit is also linked to possible demonstrations by Tibetan refugees.

It is not true that the visit was cancelled due to the activities of the Tibetan refugees. We have left no stones unturned to ensure that anti-Chinese activities do not take place on Nepali soil.

Bloody revolution

Saroj Karki in mysansar.com, 13 December

Members of Youth for Blood group have been waging a nationwide campaign against the mismanagement by the Red Cross of its Blood Transfusion Center for the last two months. According to the group, Red Cross has increased its service charge for ‘fast’ and ‘normal’ service - a practice unheard of before. It has mismanaged the centrifuges machines that separate red blood cells and platelet, and has not repaired them. The blood donors list is outdated and the group says technicians at the center lack training and experience. In Biratnagar and Dharan signatures have been collected and the ‘email the Prime Minister’ campaign activated to make their voices heard.
Boy scout prime minister

The big question this week is not why Wen Jiabao scrubbed his Nepal visit at the last moment, it is about whether or not Prime Minister Ram Babu is finally going to dump his Mustang after getting car sick on Wednesday. As anyone who has ridden this deshi SUV knows, its road handling capacity leaves much to be desired. The Mustang is built to carry twice the legal passenger capacity on the Beni-Marpha road in the monsoon. Not surprising, therefore, that after negotiating some hairpin bends on the Naubise downhill at 75kmph, the Comrade Right Honourable Prime Minister started throwing up. Or is Mr Lal Dhoj simply getting sick and tired of it all?

Good to see former guerrilla chieftains have turned into boy scouts. And there was the prime minister himself decked up not in combat fatigues, but in khakis reciting the Boy Scout oath with the three-finger salute:

"On my honour I will do my best To do my duty to God and my country..."

Here’s a thought: instead of integrating them into the army, why didn’t we just induct Maoist Tenderfoots from the cantonments into the boy scout movement so they could do their duty to God and country?

because it symbolises “national unity”, or Comrade Kwiadru who dispatched people he didn’t like to the next life now proclaiming himself to be a Bodhisattva and installing himself as the head honcho of the Lumbini Development Trust?

The Ass takes umbrage at suggestions that the Supply Minister’s decision to have dual pricing for diesel is “asinine”. And those who call it “hare brained” are seriously insulting all hares. However, the Minister of Undersupply risks undoing the parity in diesel and kerosene, which had stopped adulteration for the past eight years. Besides, it’s completely unworkable. Industries will just buy diesel from private suppliers.

After the way we let the trolley bus service go to pot, ran the brick and tile factory to the ground, turned Nepal’s first footwear factory into a heart centre, converted the Ring Road green belt into a depot for construction material, guess the Chinese would just be dying to donate us a new airport in Pokhara, take over West Seti and gift five Y-12s to NAC.

Whereas advanced countries have corrupt military deals involving nuclear submarines, it is a sign of our small-is-beautiful mindset that the Nepal Army is currently embroiled in a Biscuit Scam. The Nepal Police is in the throes of an Instant Noodle Scandal. And the Armed Police force is being accused of kickbacks in a major Mosquito Net Deal. Just imagine if we had a navy.

Nepal Tourism Board, a firm believer in the adage ‘It’s Never Too Late To Get the Worm’, has decided to launch an advertising blitz in December to promote Nepal Tourism Year 2011.