

Upper Dolpo

REGION	Shey Phoksundo
DURATION	21 days
MAX ALTITUDE	5,350 m
GRADE	Strenuous
SEASON	Mar-May · Sep-Dec
FROM	from \$5,000

Overview

The Nepal of a thousand years ago

In the far north-west of Nepal, hard against the Tibetan border, lies Dolpo - one of the most isolated and least-visited regions in the entire Himalaya.

This is trekking at its most raw and immersive. For sixteen nights you will camp in the wilderness, carrying everything you need with a dedicated crew of guides, cooks, and pack mules, crossing three major mountain passes above 5,000 metres and walking for seven to twelve hours a day through terrain with almost no outside connectivity. It is a demanding trek, best suited to fit and experienced trekkers willing to trade comfort for genuine remoteness - but the reward is a version of Nepal that very few travelers ever see: empty trails, arid valleys guarded by snow leopards, and a culture rooted in the ancient, nature-worshipping Bon religion rather than the Buddhism more familiar elsewhere in the Himalaya.

The journey opens gently in Kathmandu, the 'city of temples', where two days are spent exploring UNESCO World Heritage Sites before flights carry you west to Nepalgunj and on to the small mountain airstrip at Juphal, where the trek itself begins. From there the landscape transforms dramatically day by day - from lush alpine forest and terraced fields in the lower valleys to the stark, high-altitude desert of Upper Dolpo, where flat-roofed stone villages such as Ringmo, Saldang, and Dho Tarap cling to hillsides beneath some of the most sacred peaks in Tibetan Bon tradition.

Along the way, the revered Shey Gumpa monastery, the turquoise expanse of Phoksundo Lake, and three formidable passes - Shey La, Kang La, and Jyanta La, each above 5,000 metres - punctuate a route that is as much a spiritual and cultural journey as it is a physical one. Encounters with the farmers, herders, and monastery caretakers of Dolpo's remote villages offer a rare, unfiltered window into a way of life shaped entirely by altitude, faith, and the rhythms of the high desert. For travelers seeking genuine wilderness, real physical challenge, and a part of Nepal that remains almost untouched by the modern world, the Upper Dolpo Circuit Trek is one of the most complete and rewarding expeditions the Himalaya has to offer.

Kathmandu: The Capital City

Kathmandu is a city rich in culture, art, and history, and its nickname - the 'city of temples' - is well earned. The trip's opening days take in several of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites scattered through the valley. Kathmandu Durbar Square, also known as Basantapur or Hanuman Dhoka, stuns visitors with its intricate wood carvings and pagoda-style temples. Swayambhunath, the hilltop 'Monkey Temple', represents religious harmony in Nepal, housing both Hindu shrines and Buddhist stupas side by side.

Pashupatinath Temple, one of the holiest Hindu sites in the country, sits beside the cremation ghats of the Bagmati River, drawing pilgrims from across Nepal and India and offering a striking juxtaposition of life and death within a single sacred site. And Boudhanath Stupa, one of the largest stupas in the world, remains a major pilgrimage destination for Buddhists who come from around the globe to circumambulate its vast mandala.

Geography, Wildlife & Culture of Dolpo

Geography

Dolpo's geography spans a remarkable range within a single trek. The lower valleys carry an alpine and subalpine climate, but as the route climbs into Upper Dolpo the landscape shifts to semi-arid and, eventually, true high-altitude desert - a frozen, wind-scoured terrain unlike almost anywhere else in Nepal. Along the way, the trail passes towering peaks, glaciers, high mountain passes, and some of the country's most dramatic arid valleys.

Flora & Fauna

The region is a haven for nature enthusiasts. Dolpo shelters the endangered snow leopard alongside blue sheep, grey wolf, marmots, lynx, fox, and wild yak, while its slopes yield some of the Himalaya's most prized medicinal herbs, including yarsagumba, panchaule, jatamasi, and wild garlic. Birdlife is similarly rich, from the snow partridge and bearded vulture to Nepal's national bird, the Himalayan monal.

The Bon Religion

Long before Buddhism arrived in the Himalaya, the ancient Bon religion - an animistic, shamanic tradition rooted in the early Zhangzhung civilization of Tibet - took hold in Dolpo, and it remains a defining thread of local life today. Bonpo culture holds nature in the highest regard, with lakes, landscapes, and especially mountains considered sacred. The trek passes several important Bon monasteries, including the revered Shey Gumpa at Shey Gumpa village and Thasung Tso Ling Gumpa near Phoksundo Lake.

Traditional Villages

Villages such as Ringmo, Saldang, Dho Tarap, and Tokyu are among the highest permanent settlements in Nepal. Their flat-roofed stone houses blend into the arid landscape, with small or absent windows at higher altitudes to trap warmth against the bitter cold. In season, vivid green fields of barley and buckwheat bring startling colour to these otherwise muted, high-desert surroundings - and despite the remoteness and hardship of life here, visitors are consistently welcomed with genuine warmth.

Highlights

- A private, fully customizable trek through the restricted landscapes of Upper Dolpo
- A highly immersive experience with virtually no crowds along the trail
- Camping beneath some of the most stunning, arid landscapes in the Himalaya
- Walking trails roamed by the endangered snow leopard and other rare wildlife
- Witnessing and immersing yourself in the ancient, nature-worshipping Bon culture
- Visiting the revered Shey Gumpa monastery and the turquoise waters of Phoksundo Lake
- Crossing three major Himalayan passes - Shey La, Kang La, and Jyanta La - all above 5,000 m

Itinerary

Day 1 - Arrival in Kathmandu - welcome to Nepal (1,400 m / 4,593 ft)

Arrive at Tribhuvan International Airport, where you are met and transferred to your hotel in

Kathmandu. In the evening, meet the trekking team over coffee for a full briefing on the route and schedule ahead, and receive the paperwork and permits needed for the journey.

- Overnight in a hotel.

Day 2 - Kathmandu sightseeing and trek preparation (1,400 m / 4,593 ft)

A full day exploring Kathmandu's UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Kathmandu Durbar Square, with its intricate wood carvings and pagoda-style temples; Swayambhunath, the hilltop 'Monkey Temple' where Hindu shrines and Buddhist stupas sit side by side; Pashupatinath Temple, one of the holiest Hindu sites in Nepal, set beside the cremation ghats of the Bagmati River; and Boudhanath Stupa, one of the largest stupas in the world and a major pilgrimage site for Buddhists. The afternoon is free for a visit to Thamel to pick up any last-minute trekking gear, alongside a final equipment check and briefing.

- Overnight in a hotel.

Day 3 - Fly from Kathmandu to Nepalgunj (150 m / 492 ft)

A short flight south-west carries you from the hills of Kathmandu down to the warm, subtropical plains of Nepalgunj, close to the Indian border, where Indian cultural influence is evident in the food, language, and streetscape. The afternoon is free to explore the bazaar and sample local street food before an early start the next morning.

- Overnight in a hotel.

Day 4 - Fly to Juphal; trek to Kagni (2,270 m / 7,447 ft)

A scenic mountain flight from Nepalgunj to the small airstrip at Juphal - there are no direct flights from Kathmandu, so this connection through Nepalgunj is the only way in. At Juphal you meet the full trekking crew: guide, cooks, kitchen assistants, porters, and pack mules, all of whom accompany you for the rest of the journey. From here, the trek begins with an easy first walk to the village of Kagni.

- Overnight camping.

Day 5 - Trek Kagni to Rechi (3,100 m / 10,170 ft)

The trail climbs steadily through forested hillside and small farming settlements, gaining significant altitude as it follows the river valley deeper into the Dolpo region.

- Overnight camping at Rechi.

Day 6 - Trek Rechi to Ringmo (3,640 m / 11,940 ft)

A memorable day's walk that culminates at Ringmo village, set beside the turquoise waters of Phoksundo Lake - the second largest and second deepest lake in Nepal, and widely considered the country's most beautiful. Fed by the lake's outflow, the Suligad waterfall tumbles nearby. The lake is held sacred by the villagers of Ringmo, and the tranquility of the setting is felt by every visitor who reaches its shores.

- Overnight camping.

Day 7 - Trek Ringmo to Lekhe Dhunga (3,670 m / 12,040 ft)

Leaving Phoksundo Lake behind, the trail continues along its northern shore before climbing into wilder, less-trodden terrain, with the landscape beginning its transition from forest toward the open, arid country that defines Upper Dolpo.

- Overnight camping.

Day 8 - Trek Lekhe Dhunga to High Camp (3,740 m / 12,270 ft)

A steady climb through increasingly remote terrain, gaining altitude in preparation for the approach to Shey Gumpa. The camp here sits in wild, high-altitude surroundings with few signs of settlement.

- Overnight camping.

Day 9 - Trek High Camp to Shey Gumpa (4,360 m / 14,305 ft)

The trail climbs into the heart of Upper Dolpo to reach Shey Gumpa, the most revered monastery for followers of the Bon religion in Dolpo and across Nepal. Inside, colourful Tibetan murals and ancient statues line the walls, alongside scrolls depicting the mythology of the nearby Crystal Mountain, the site of a major pilgrimage and kora held every twelve years in the Year of the Dragon.

- Overnight camping.

Day 10 - Trek Shey Gumpa to Namgung (4,090 m / 13,418 ft)

The route crosses Shey La Pass (5,010 m), rewarding the climb with a sweeping panorama that takes in the Himalayan ranges of both Nepal and Tibet, a wide view of the Tibetan plateau to the north, and the distinctive desert landscape of Mustang to the south. A descent on the far side leads to the settlement of Namgung.

- Overnight camping.

Day 11 - Trek Namgung to Saldang (3,770 m / 12,368 ft)

A descending trail leads to Saldang, one of the largest and most important villages in Upper Dolpo, with flat-roofed stone houses set against the arid hillside and, in season, vivid green fields of barley and buckwheat swaying against the desert-brown landscape.

- Overnight camping.

Day 12 - Trek Saldang to Rakyo (3,850 m / 12,630 ft)

A gentler day's walk through the Nagon Khola valley, passing scattered settlements and chortens as the trail continues deeper into the high Dolpo plateau.

- Overnight camping at Rakyo.

Day 13 - Trek Rakyo to High Camp (4,585 m / 15,045 ft)

A significant climb in preparation for the crossing of Jyanta La Pass, gaining substantial altitude through open, wind-scoured terrain with far-reaching desert views in every direction.

- Overnight camping.

Day 14 - Cross Jyanta La Pass to Tokyu (4,240 m / 13,910 ft)

An early start tackles Jyanta La Pass (5,220 m), the trek's third and final major pass, connecting the village of Changaon with Tokyu on the far side. The descent leads into Tokyu, a Tarap valley village known for its monastery and its position as a gateway to Dho Tarap.

- Overnight camping.

Day 15 - Trek Tokyu to Dho Tarap (3,945 m / 12,942 ft)

A relatively short day's walk down the Tarap valley to Dho Tarap, one of the highest permanent settlements in the region and a major hub of Bon and Buddhist culture, with flat-roofed houses, prayer flags, and the valley's characteristic high-desert scenery.

- Overnight camping.

Day 16 - Acclimatization and exploration day at Dho Tarap (3,945 m / 12,942 ft)

A rest day built in to recover from the high passes just crossed. Spend the day exploring Dho Tarap on foot - its village monasteries, the daily rhythms of a Tarap valley settlement where farming and animal husbandry still shape everyday life, and the chance to interact with local families and learn more about the Bon culture practiced here.

- Overnight camping.

Day 17 - Trek Dho Tarap to Khanigaon (2,950 m / 9,678 ft)

The trail begins its long descent out of Upper Dolpo, following the Tarap Chu river gorge as the arid highland scenery gradually gives way to forest and greener terrain.

- Overnight camping at Khanigaon.

Day 18 - Trek Khanigaon to Dunai (2,140 m / 7,020 ft)

A continued descent along the river valley, passing through pine forest and small farming villages back to Dunai, the district headquarters of Dolpa.

- Overnight camping.

Day 19 - Trek Dunai to Juphal (2,475 m / 8,120 ft)

The final trekking day retraces the trail back to Juphal, an easier walk of a few hours through terraced fields and familiar scenery. An evening in Juphal often includes a farewell dinner with the trekking crew who have accompanied you throughout the journey.

- Overnight camping.

Day 20 - Fly to Kathmandu via Nepalgunj (1,400 m / 4,593 ft)

An early flight from Juphal connects through Nepalgunj back to Kathmandu, returning you from the remote trails of Dolpo to the capital within a single day. The afternoon and evening are free for a hot shower, laundry, and rest, with a celebratory Thakali dinner and traditional folk performance to mark the end of the trek.

- Overnight in a hotel.

Day 21 - Final departure

Depending on your onward flight time, the day is free until your transfer to Tribhuvan International Airport for departure - or extend your stay in Nepal independently to explore further.

What's included

- An authentic Thakali welcome dinner and a cultural performance featuring traditional folk songs
- All airport transfers and sightseeing on a private basis
- Domestic two-way flight transfers (Kathmandu-Nepalgunj-Juphal and back) as mentioned in the itinerary
- All 20 nights of accommodation - hotels and comfortable tents - throughout the trip
- 16 nights of comfortable tented accommodation during the trek, as mentioned in the itinerary
- Daily breakfast throughout the trip
- Lunch and dinner from the trek's starting day to its ending day
- All necessary paperwork - restricted area permit, national park permits, and TIMS card
- An English-speaking, experienced, government-licensed professional trekking guide
- The required number of porters, kitchen staff, and mules during the trek
- A well-equipped medical kit with necessary medications, carried by the guide throughout the trek
- One local SIM card (returnable) for communication during your stay
- All government and local taxes
- Guide, porter, and cook salaries, food, and accommodation during the trek
- Arrangement of emergency helicopter service, payable through your travel insurance provider
- Sleeping bags, duffle bags, and trekking route maps, where necessary
- Sufficient mineral water during the Kathmandu sightseeing program only

Not included

- International flight tickets
- Personal expenses
- Kathmandu sightseeing entrance fees (approx. USD 40 per person)

- Lunch and dinner in Kathmandu and Nepalgunj
- Nepal visa costs (two passport-size photos and USD 40 for a 30-day tourist visa; visa forms can be completed online in advance)
- Travel health insurance (highly recommended)
- Tips for guide, porter, and driver (recommended)
- Hot showers and mineral water during the trek
- Any other expenses not mentioned under What's Included

Available departures

- 15 Mar 2026
- 02 Apr 2026
- 21 Apr 2026
- 12 May 2026
- 18 Sep 2026
- 06 Oct 2026