

The houses looked like they were made of Lego; the people, like ants. My head was dizzy and I was breathing fast. It was precisely then that I realised that my goal of reaching the 4,200-metre high (13,500 feet) Kyangin Ri peak in the Langtang valley of Nepal—one that I had shamelessly and prematurely boasted about to all my family members and friends prior to leaving Dhaka—was not going to be

fulfilled. Nearly out of breath, I mentally prepared myself for all the taunts and insults I would have to face upon returning home, and eventually handed over my flag—yes, I carried a flag—to Prasiith, one of the five trekkers. “Wave it on my behalf,” I said as we shook hands. For a moment it seemed like a heart-rending exchange, before my friend from Nepal—quite annoyed at that point—shouted: “Why the hell did

you not take an altitude sickness pill? Go down and drink some water.” I don’t really remember the specific details of my steep trek back to the base—Kyanjin Gumba, a monastery located 3,900 metres high—but what that day did confirm was my fear of heights. I recall using all four limbs to crawl down a shrubby path, which was actually safe enough to walk down through. As I neared the base, I realised that the locals who were staring at my rather acrobatic descent were not concerned but actually laughing their guts out. After all, the peak was located just 300 meters higher—albeit steep—than the Kyanjin Gumba. While going up, I managed to cover more than half the distance in just 30 minutes. However, it took me more than an hour to return. This was not exactly the highlight of my six-day trek in the beautiful Langtang valley, which I had visited back in 2013. But for obvious reasons, this is the rather embarrassing story that gained the most currency, courtesy of my fellow trekkers. Located in the north of Kathmandu valley in the Himalayas, Langtang is a region that borders Tibet. The Langtang National Park may not be as popular as some of the other trekking routes in Nepal but it does attract people who prefer taking on easy treks. It was a good

bargain. There were no risky routes, unless, of course, you decided—like me—to take on the steep excursion without taking the required pills. All you needed to be able to do was walk for hours every day. And in return you would get to visit UNESCO heritage sites, witness star-filled skies, breeze by beautiful lakes and, towards the end, witness the massive Langtang glacier. Tragically, it was the breaking of this very ice that led to the deaths of more than 300 people. When the earthquake hit Nepal in 2015, a large portion of the ice collapsed which led to an avalanche almost wiping out the entire village of Langtang. While you can still go for treks there, my friends in Nepal tell me that it is not as heavenly as it was before. It was a trek that would lead you through landscapes, past humungous trees bordering the lakes. There were spots where you could just sit on tree trunks and gaze at the mountains across the lakes for hours. And then as you went higher up, you would go through brown, desolate regions filled with temples and shrubs. Our pitstops were as interesting as the long walks. There were small wooden houses with slanted roofs. Their interiors were decorated with colourful curtains and carpets. The designs on some of the curtains told stories of the residents’

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The flag waved at the top of the peak by a non-Bangladeshi



The boy-band pose in front of the Langtang glacier



An aerial view of the Kyanjin Gumba

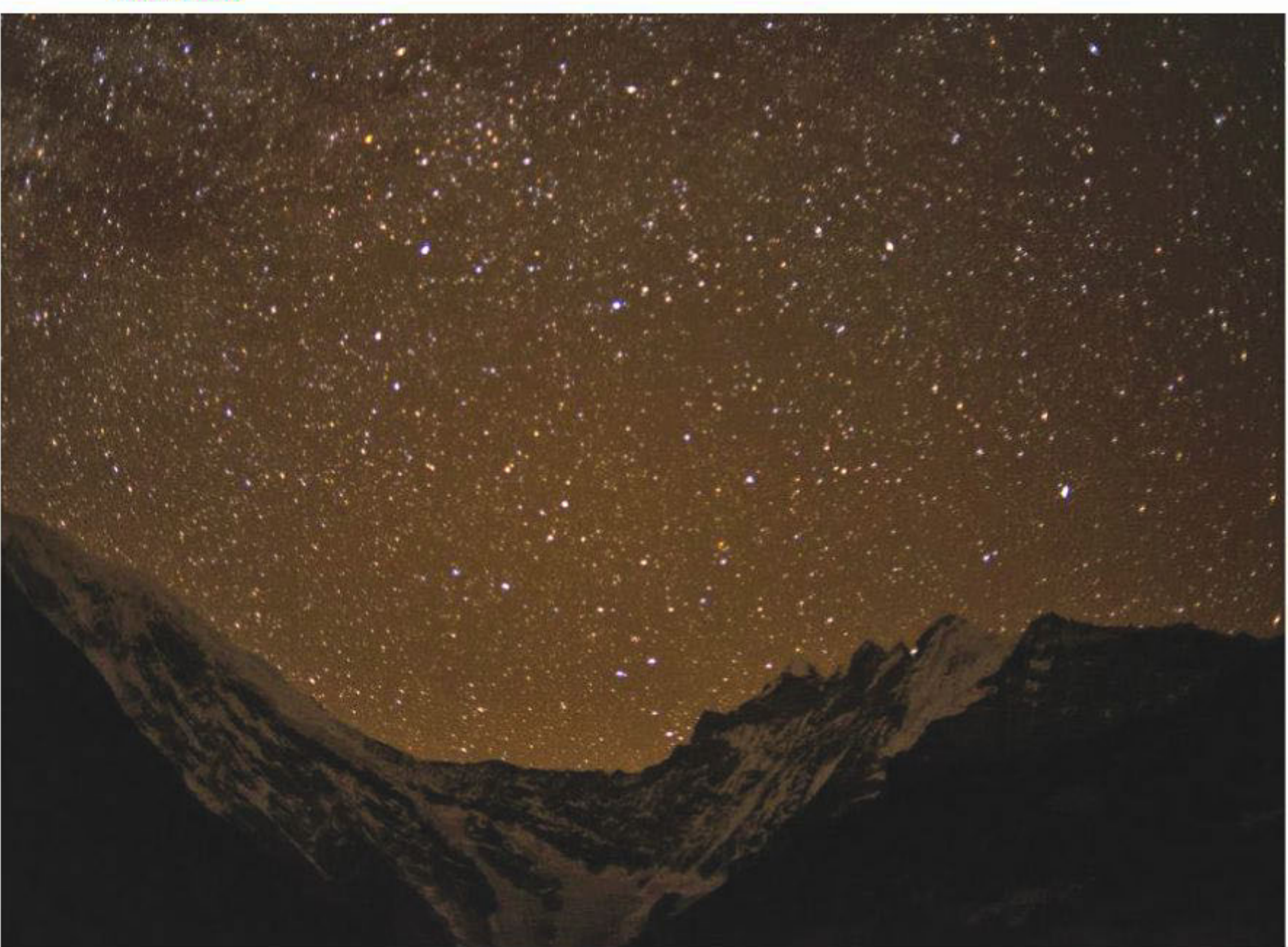
# STARRY NIGHTS AND ICE-COVERED PEAKS IN LANGTANG

NAIMUL KARIM

PHOTOS: PRASIITH STHAPIT



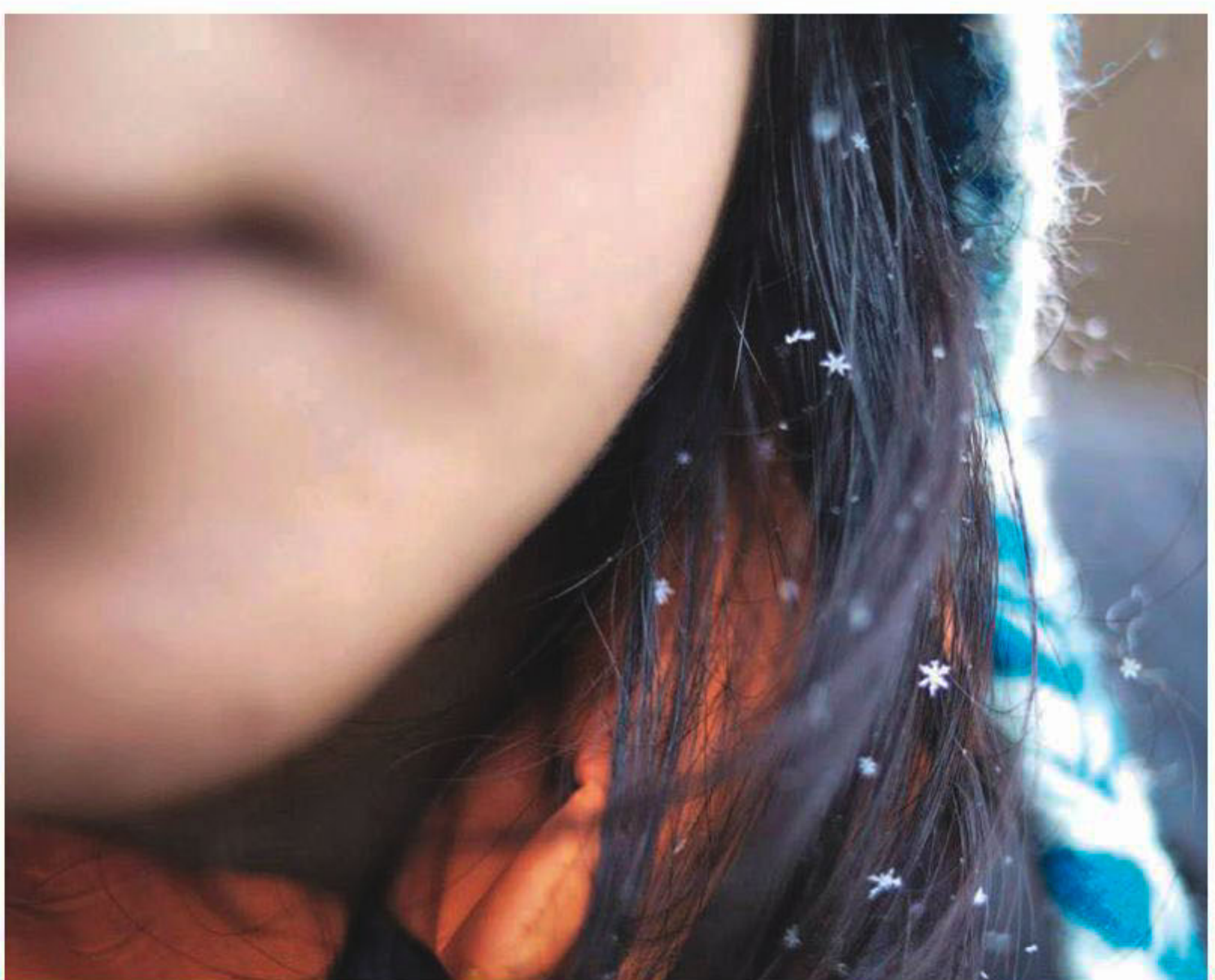
One of the many hanging bridges at Langtang valley



A starry night at Langtang village

ancestors, which many of them narrated gleefully after chugging down three to four pegs of hot rice wine. The wine and heater, which was fuelled by wood, made you feel warm and relaxed after walking the whole day. The food throughout the trip was simple, consisting of rice, dal and vegetables. And yet, you would easily be able to finish two plates without any complaints. Add in the pickle and it would have been difficult to get you away from the dinner table.

It was the month of December and taking a bath was out of the question. In fact, I recall stepping out of one of these houses to take a photo, with a warm glass of lemon water. By the end of the photo session, the water had frozen. We reached Langtang village, around 3,430 metres high, on the second day of our trek. It had taken us a day and a half—or around 12 hours of walking—from Sayfru, our starting point which was 1,460 metres high, to reach the village.



PHOTOS: PRASIITH STHAPIT

The perfect snowflake



The trek makes you breeze by beautiful lakes

Much to our surprise, it had just begun snowing there. I had never seen snow before and while it was painfully cold, it was mesmerising to witness the near-perfect shapes of snowflakes on our gloves and jackets. I must admit at this point that the snowflakes did seem like some of my friends had a bad case of dandruff, but a closer inspection left me completely stunned. The light snowfall stopped an hour later and what followed was one of the clearest skies I had ever witnessed. There was barely a spot in the sky where you could not find a star. That was the night when I truly understood the meaning of a starlit sky. Prasiith, a photographer by profession, was busy playing around with the aperture of his camera, trying to get as many stars in focus as possible, while the rest of us were busy drinking and gulping down whatever our host had to offer, for it was cold, but we were desperate to stay outside and keep staring at the heavenly bodies. We started for our final destination, the Kyanjin Gumba, on the third day of the trek. As we neared the 4,000-metre mark, the glaciers gradually made their

presence felt. We had followed the river all the way to the top to its source. It was noon by then, and for the first time in two days, the sun was out and that made for some breathtaking views. We began our descent from the next day and it took us around three days to go back to Kathmandu. As far as money is concerned, this was a trip that was very much within budget. There are not really a lot of avenues to spend your money in the mountains, and as such you don't end up paying a lot. What happened to the village in 2015 was unbelievable. People who have trekked the valley ever since have said that there is no evidence of the village at all. The teahouses and trees, which were in abundance when we had gone there, had all disappeared. However, a new village is on the way. The tour guides are already offering trekking services. The houses are being built further away from the danger zones and there does seem to be resurgence. And the best way that you can be a part of that resurgence is by planning your next trip there. ■