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A view of Mt Mansalu from Shayla village. PHOTO: TANVIR ISLAM

Pungyen Gompa

where the mountains whisper



Salehin Arshady is an explorer, mountaineer, youth activist and writer. He has climbed and documented all the highest peaks of Bangladesh over 3000 feet and explored many trekking routes in the Indian and Nepal Himalayas. He lives by exploring unknown territories and with his writings unearths stories that inspire humans to consider their relationship with nature.

SALEHIN ARSHADY

A blunt, frosty night hugged me as I went out of the wooden cottage at Shayla, one of the beautiful tiny hamlets on the slopes of Mansiri Himal.

It was 3:30 am. The whole village, located on the Manaslu circuit trek, looked haunted. Even the stray dogs weren't barking.

We were one of the first teams to visit this part of the Himalayas in recent times. Covid-19 pandemic has hit the local tourism industry hard. Most of the teahouses were shut due to a lack of trekkers, except for a couple of small huts like the one we took refuge in.

We switched on our headlights and started trekking for Pungyen Gompa, a monastery built just beneath the shoulder of mount Manaslu, locally known as Mt. Pungyen.

Local Nubri people, a Tibetan nomadic tribe said to have settled here 400 years ago, believe high on the icy peaks dwells the deity called lord Pungyen, protector of the region. They built the monastery to please the deity.

I am on a mission. A couple of years ago I developed this crazy urge to explore the great arc



The team poses in front of the Pungyen Gompa.

PHOTO: BISSHO RAJ LAMA

On the horizon, just beneath the glacier, I could see a solitary Kani, a monument of stones engraved with Buddhist holy scripts standing proudly. After six long hours of trekking, we finally reached our destination – the famous monastery of Pungyen valley. Sitting at an altitude of 4,700 meters, Pungyen Gompa is a hermitage where devoted Buddhist monks isolate themselves from worldly chaos and meditate in the lap of the Himalayas peacefully.

Paradise is only for the deserving ones – for those who could sacrifice all the worldly desires, could breathe the thin air, withstand harsh weather, and be ready for all the arduous efforts to survive with the bare minimum. And there I was, full of worldly needs and desires. These mystical dimensions were much grander than my grasp.

I looked at the clock, it was already noon. Sun was radiating extreme heat. Thick clouds from below started to enter the valley and in a twinkling of an eye, the whole paradise was lost. The time was up and we started to descend. As we returned to the wooden door, I looked back but could see nothing but mist.

However, I could sense a beckoning silence coming from the mystic land, and I knew I had to come back, again and again, to explore what lies behind those snow-covered giants.



Tsum Valley, a relatively unexplored destination, for 7 days. On May 12, we took the side trek to Pungyen Gompa from Shayla. The trekking ended on May 20 when we reached Dharapani, 397 km away from Kathmandu.

We walked through the silent village following a tiny path and soon entered the towering realm of age-old pines.

The dark, mysterious forest witnessed seven sparkling head torches moving slowly. After walking a while, the forest patch ended. We came in front of a long suspension bridge over a stream coming from the Pungyen glacier, one of the prominent glaciers of Manaslu, the eighth highest mountain in the world.

I decided to rest for a couple of minutes. My teammates moved on. Their headlights on the bridge looked like some wandering fireflies. I switched off my torch to enjoy this spectacular sight. One by one the fireflies vanished in the next turn. Suddenly, I was swallowed by pitch-black darkness.

After a couple of minutes, as my eyes got adjusted, I looked up at the moonless sky. It was stunning! The Milky Way was hanging over the silhouette of the Himalayan giants like a carpet of numerous luminescent dots on the largest canvas.

It was a moment of revelation! On that mountain trail in the darkness, I thought I had a glimpse into the purpose of life.

I always wondered why the sages, the yogis, and the prophets choose to meditate in the mountains. What could be the connection between spirituality and mountains? The answer might be rooted in the uninterrupted, deafening silence, in the absolute detachment from the hustle and bustle of daily life.

Overwhelmed with lots of half-grasped thoughts, I started walking quietly. After a while, I

regrouped with the team.

The path was getting steeper. For half an hour we climbed an uphill track and soon reached beyond the tree line, and the whole landscape started to change dramatically leading us to a ravishing stream, coming directly from the melting Pungyen glacier.

The trail along the stream now became narrower, harder because of boulders and pebbles. As the dawn broke, we started to scramble up this path carefully. Soon the mighty Manaslu and its neighbours chose to reveal themselves. As the first rays of the sun hit the peaks, a riot of colours engulfed the Himalayan giants unveiling a mesmerizing show.

As we climbed further up, we, coincidentally, encountered an ancient wooden door hidden in the mist. It seemed like we were standing at the doorway of heaven guarded by white-cloaked giants. I had the intuition that, beyond that half-closed door, I was about to discover something incredible.

The gut feeling proved to be right. As the mist lifted the curtain, we saw a lush green meadow adorned by beautiful wildflowers. Apart from white and pink rhododendrons, large patches of yellow cowslips and blue drumstick primroses painted the valley in varied hues.

The pristine alpine meadow was surrounded by the snow-covered giants with glaciers hanging from their flanks gleaming in the sun. A stream was flowing gently cutting through the grassland like a silver serpent, making a bubbling sound. There was also a small lake. I sat on its bank quietly and spent time watching the sublime reflection of the towering peaks – HIMAL CHULI, NGADI CHULI, and all its neighbors being kissed by floating clouds. But Manaslu was shy. A veil of clouds obscured the two-horned deity, the mountain of the soul.

The lake was like a giant screen and the whole landscape was an amphitheater. I was hypnotised. I wished to stop the clock at that very moment.



HOW TO GO

Manaslu circuit trek falls under Manaslu conservation area.

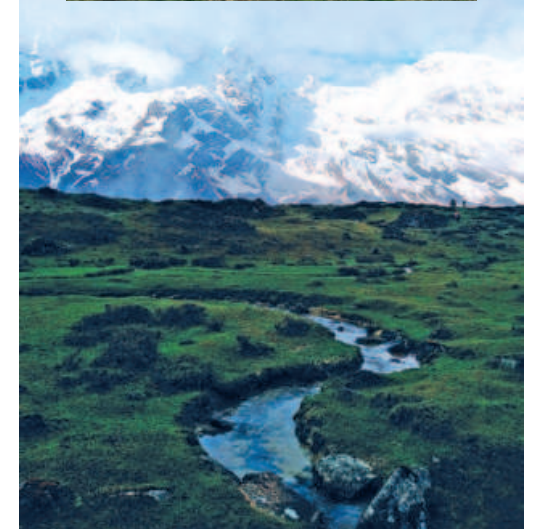
As the trail is in close vicinity to the Tibet border, one needs to obtain a special permit. There are villages and teahouses along the way where you can eat and stay.

of the Himalayas. From Nanga Parbat in the western Himalayas in Pakistan to Namcha Barwa in the eastern Himalayas in Tibet, I set my goal to trek this whole staggering 2,800-mile terrain spanning Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet.

To complete this mammoth task, going for the Nepal chapter first was a convenient choice for me.

After traversing the Annapurna, Langtang, Dhaulagiri, and Rolwaling regions in recent times, it's time to explore the Manaslu and Ganesh Himal regions.

This phase of the exploration began on April 30 from Maccha Khola after an 8-hour drive from Kathmandu (distance 80 km). We entered Manaslu Circuit Trek on May 08, after exploring



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