

Mothers offered to swap their babies for mine: 'He is so white, so clean!'

Jane Wilson Howarth took her two young children on a short trek in Nepal

The Royal Nepal Airlines check-in at Gatwick was in chaos, but we were ushered to the front of the queue: Nepalis love small children. I was going on a short trek with Alexander and Sebastian, my two youngsters, and two other mothers with their children. A couple of days later we assembled with trepidation just 10km from Kathmandu airport. With three luggage porters and a porter for each of the five children, it seemed a ridiculously large expedition.

We were quickly away from the traffic and pollution of the Kathmandu valley, climbing in rich forest, alive with birdsong, crimson

rhododendron blossoms lying among the leaf litter. We devoured wild strawberries and startled the lizards basking wherever patches of sun reached the forest floor. Like so many treks in Nepal, this one started hard – we climbed 3,000ft that first day.

Four-month-old Sebastian had it easy in his oblong basket, protected from the sun by a cotton sheet. Alexander was more energetic, but when he and the other four-year-olds started to tire, we loaded them into adapted conical baskets strung from the porters' headbands. They loved sitting high up, but demanded stories or songs

from whoever walked behind them. I did not have enough breath to oblige, but wanted to gawp silently at the Himalayas, the profusion of birds and shrubs half-recognised from British gardens: mahonia, berberis, fragrant wintergreen. What a relief to reach our night stop, Chisapani, at 7,000ft. This was cold once the sun disappeared; sweaty as we were, we did not wash much at the village tap.

Next day the paths tacked up through terraces and villages where, on seeing Sebastian's basket, women shrieked "*Nani ayo!*" (a baby has come!) and hurried to peer inside. Mothers offered to swap their

infants for mine: "He is so white; so clean!" But I said my husband would be angry if I gave away his sons.

By the third night we had walked through oak and rhododendron forest of the Langtang National Park. The lodge at Mangengoth at 11,000ft was as high as we wanted to go with young children. Here we found the most scenic long-drop toilet, surrounded spectacularly with red, white, pink and purple rhododendron blossoms. Chandra – a powerful bear of a porter – picked flowers for the children and allowed himself to be buried in their giggling bodies. We ate delicious garlic soup to protect us from altitude sickness.

A tough 5,000ft descent was immediately followed by a 3,000ft climb up to Tarke Ghyang. The suspension bridge at the bottom was half-rotten and the river boiled furiously beneath us; even the porters crossed gingerly. We reached Melamchi Pul on the sixth day, sweaty, smelly and sore-kneed, but satisfied. We three unfit mothers had managed a trek, even with children.

Jane Wilson Howarth's guide to healthy travel, *Bugs, Bites and Bowels*, was published this year (Cadogan); *Lemurs of the World* is republished this autumn (Impact).



Swap babies? Children in Nepal

How to get there

Jane Wilson Howarth arranged her trek through Gates trekking agency, PO Box 2081, Naxal, Kathmandu (tel 001 977 1 413 645, fax 414 184). It cost £125 for the six days for three porters; this did not include accommodation in lodges or tea houses, or food.

Royal Nepal Airlines (0171-287 4900) has the only direct flight from Britain to Nepal. It flies Gatwick-Frankfurt-Dubai-Kathmandu on Fridays and Sundays for about £600.

Visa costs are around £15 (for a month) and trekking permits; national park entry fees cost an additional £15 per week.

Safety note

It is inadvisable to go above 12,000ft with children and anyone trekking above 10,000ft or 3,000m must read up on mountain sickness. This malaise can be highly dangerous and children are at a much higher risk than adults.