



Return to Saldang and the Upper Dolpo – Oct 2017!

Dear Friends (and friends of friends):

We have completed our extreme trekking journey through the remote Upper Dolpo region of Nepal. A group of 11 trekkers, all from BC, undertook the High Route of the Great Himalaya Trail from Jumla to Saldang and then onto Juphal. The first half of the route from Jumla to Saldang was new for everyone, including the trekking company, [Happy Feet](#). The terrain was extreme and the journey arduous and we took 4 days longer than planned to reach Saldang! Headlamps were needed on some days to reach camp, at least for those of us at the back of the pack!



I spent three full days in Saldang and area and visited all three schools that [Altitude Project](#) supported in 2017:

- Saldang – 1,000 villagers; 76 students up to Class 6
- Komash – 200 villagers; 27 students up to Class 5
- Karang – 500 villagers; 46 students up to Class 5

The reception from the students, teachers and villagers in each community was overwhelming. It is clear that the support we provide is critical, and that the benefits far outweigh the effort it takes to gather support for these remote communities.

Our arrival, although later than planned, was timed perfectly. We arrived on Oct 24 in time to enjoy an evening meal with Pema and Kunsang, the project coordinators, complete with Saldang cappuccinos - made with powdered milk but somehow extremely delicious! The next morning, the village was buzzing with news that school sponsors from Canada had finally arrived. Several of the village school council members

arrived early. Small talk was challenging, as most adults only speak Tibetan, but thanks to Pema, Kunsang and Doma (our Sherpa guide), translations were reasonably smooth. And it is remarkable how well smiling and laughing translate into any language!



Oct 25 was the last day of exams. Student benches and desks were positioned outside in the school yard because it is warmer there than in the classrooms. I visited with the students until exam time, and then I left to visit the school at Karang.



Karang is about one hour north of Saldang and is a village of about 500 people. We (Doma and I) again traveled by horse, led by Kunsang, who carefully and gently encouraged the horses through the difficult spots and along the narrow paths over the steep sections (closing my eyes was best in such circumstances and I was glad that my horse had already lived for 17 years!)



The school at Karang had completed their school year. Doma and I met with the school coordinator, Pema Gojor Gurung, and one of the English speaking teachers. They told us the history of the school and how their main sponsor had to withdraw in 2017, as they did not have enough funds to support them.

Fortunately, we, along the [Peter Werth](#) and a few other individuals had been able to help keep the school operational. This school will need a high level of support in 2018. We had a very nice lunch - dal bhat – what a surprise! - And then had a tour of the school and health post that is adjacent to the school. The health post is funded by the daughter of local star of the movie Caravan (Thinley Lhondup who died tragically last year). The health post is a combination of western medicine and local “Amchi” medicine.

We rode back to Saldang and found the rest of our group had arrived. Pema invited us to use the school yard as our campsite so tents were put up and the kitchen crew got busy making our afternoon snack of tea and biscuits!

The next day was the last day of school when children receive their final result and put on dance performances. The entire community came out for the celebration and sat patiently on the hillside, as each child was called to the podium to receive their result, a khata (prayer scarf), and words of wisdom from one of the many village elders presenting the awards. Our entire group was seated in place of honour with the head of the school council and the school founder. As the proceedings were coming to a close, I was asked to present the top three academic awards. It was an immense honour to hand the hard earned awards to the students and to present them each with a khata. After the official ceremonies finished, the adults joined together and danced in large circles to music of the draney, a traditional six stringed Tibetan instrument. They danced well past into the night and I suspect there may have been modest amounts of “chang” (local beer) involved for some!



The following day, many in our group wanted to visit a historic monastery to the north near Nisalogan. Villagers provided horses for them to make the trip but based on reports at the end of the day, most people would never ride a horse again! Saddles are wooden (covered with blankets) and stirrups are short. The

riding position can be extremely uncomfortable, especially when riding long distances. One person counted the number of river crossings at 37! Although the monastery is ancient (800 years) and was reported to be extremely interesting, I'm sure walking there would have been preferred, if time had allowed.

My day was spent visiting the school at Komas, normally a six hour walk to the east. Pema and I made the journey by horse in three hours. Pema warned me that the school year was finished and that Tulu Lama, the coordinator for the school, was not in the village. We crossed the high, steep pass and could see the village in the distance, still 1 ½ hours away. As we got closer, we could see activity at the school and Pema thought they were having a meeting. Long story short, he set me up and had sent word that we would be coming. All the children were lined up at the school gate with prayer flags in hand and gave us a warm "Tashi Delek" welcome. We were seated next to the Lama and teachers and the children performed traditional dances. There were many words of enormous appreciation from the Lama for our support. We were fed a delicious meal of dal bhat and there was just enough time for a few photos so the village women rushed home to prepare. Hair brushed and "kamlo" (hand woven blanket) wrapped around in traditional fashion and they were ready! What fun! We made the return journey without incident although I soon learned why people dismount to ride down steep trails!



Our group leader and professional photographer, David R. Gluns, packed special lighting equipment for this trip and spent a full day in Saldang making portrait photos of students and villagers. I can't wait to see the results once he returns in January. Dave often does two or three treks each year and is currently leading another group through a different region of the country.

We brought 15 LuminAid solar lights to Saldang. Pema had a priority list of village elders with eyesight problems. Next time, we'll need to send 100 lights! Thanks to [LuminAid](#) for access to the non-profit portal so we could purchase the lights at a discount!



We left Saldang on Oct 28 and made our way to Juphal for our Nov 5 departure back to Kathmandu. Tenzin's father lent us a horse for the trip out, and an eleven year-old boy led us through the Himalayas for three days and over two 5,000 meter passes before leaving us and riding home alone – it's a different world in the Dolpo! It was an incredible trip and our group did very well together. There were a few odd maladies along the way but everyone survived with many tales to tell!



In Kathmandu, I visited two hostels and a boarding school, where children from the Upper Dolpo live and finish their higher education. We sponsored Tenzin Norbu of Saldang at the boarding school this year because the traditional hostel was full. It is a Tibetan exile school, which supports his cultural needs well. Of 700 students, 200 live at the school. It's clean, well organized and has plenty of space for outdoor recreation. The week we visited, dentists from abroad were doing annual checkups for all the students. All students receive vaccinations as well. It's amazing that he can have such an opportunity for \$1,200 US per year. We will continue to support his higher education.



Altitude Project will continue to raise funds to support these schools in the Upper Dolpo in 2018. We are grateful for donations at any time of year and will begin our efforts in earnest in January. A reminder that all funds must be sent to Nepal by March 15 each year, as all supplies and materials must be purchased and transported to the Dolpo in the last half of March.

Our goal for 2018 is to raise \$30,000, which is significantly higher than last year. After visiting the schools this year and gaining a better understanding of their needs and of all the groups and individuals who try to support these needs, I believe this goal is the minimum needed so I hope that we can count on your support again.

A few things to note:

- 1) We now have a logo thanks to the ladies at Black Sheep Branding Co. in Nelson! The logo is inspired by the children's drawings, which always includes a chorten or stupa. There are eight types of stupas, all referring to major events in Buddha's life.
- 2) We are in the planning stages for a fund raising event to be held in Nelson near the end of February. Details will be announced in early January – we hope you will be able to attend!
- 3) Our application with CRA for charitable status in Canada is still in process. Based on recent correspondence, we don't expect a decision until sometime in the New Year. Fingers crossed! It will happen – it's just timing now. *Thanks again to Burns Fitzpatrick Law Firm in Vancouver for their help with our application.*
- 4) We are now on [Facebook](#) – please like us to see our latest updates and photos.
- 5) **And here are the ways to make a donation to Altitude Project:**
 - a. Inter-bank transfer from your bank to this account number at CIBC in Nelson, BC, Canada – 00270/8458790
 - b. E-transfers can be sent to davidswain@shaw.ca – for the security question please use “What is this for” with the answer SaldangSchool (no spaces).
 - c. If these options don't work for you, a cheque payable to Saldang School can be mailed to David Swain, 4228 Crescent Bay Road, Nelson BC, V1L 6N1, Canada and we will deposit it in the account
 - d. On the Donate page of the Altitude Project website www.altitudeproject.ca

*Tashi delek, Namaste, Sincere Thanks
David Swain*

P.s. Please, forward this message to anyone who may be interested or is able to help!