



# NOMADIC SKIES

EXPEDITIONS

**EXCLUSIVE  
ONE-OFF EXPEDITION**

In the Footsteps  
of Matthiessen's  
Snow Leopard



# A UNIQUE LITERARY JOURNEY INTO THE LANDSCAPES, CULTURE & PEOPLE OF REMOTE NEPAL

A 23-day camp trekking expedition into  
remote and hidden Dolpo in North West Nepal  
to the monastery of the sacred Crystal Mountain.



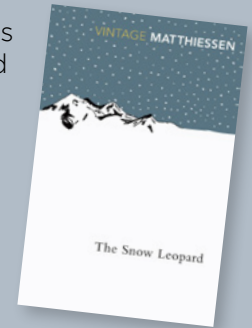


Peter Matthiessen's book, *The Snow Leopard*, was first published in 1978 and has since become a classic piece of travel literature, winning the National Book Award twice.



The book charts the author's journey to the sacred Crystal Mountain in remote High Himalayan NW Nepal with field naturalist George Schaller. Matthiessen was seeking the illusive snow leopard but also undertaking a spiritual journey, while George Schaller was aiming to complete field research into the Mountain Bharal (blue sheep) of the high Himalaya.

The publication of *The Snow Leopard* was the first major book to bring the remote Dolpo area into international focus. Not long after Matthiessen and Schaller visited, the area was closed to visitors for decades, and though it is now open again, the area remains little visited and remote, retaining its vibrant Tibetan culture.



Photos - original archive from the 1973 expedition, courtesy of George Schaller.



## TRUE NATURE: THE ODYSSEY OF PETER MATTHIESSEN

Asked to define himself, Peter Matthiessen liked to say, simply, that he was “a fiction writer.” But he was also a journalist and naturalist, an ornithologist and ichthyologist, a fisherman, explorer, and labor rights activist — not to mention a fleeing CIA agent who co-founded the Paris Review as his cover. As a seeker, restlessly searching, Matthiessen was attuned to both science and mysticism, which made him, in the words of one admirer, “a kind of Thoreau-on-the-Road.” At the start of the 1970s, he traded psychedelics for Zen Buddhism; he eventually attained the rank of Zen roshi. He yearned for the stillness of Shakyamuni, but he was far too complicated to ever be truly still. This was a man who couldn’t help but move, and write, and rage against corporate greed and climate change and the wanton destruction of the world’s most wild places.

Photos - original archive from the 1973 expedition, courtesy of George Schaller.

TRUE NATURE: The Odyssey of Peter Matthiessen will chart the improbable journey of this poet-scientist. Born into blue-blood privilege in 1927, Matthiessen eschewed convention in favor of a peripatetic life that saw him become involved with everything from Cold War espionage to the hunt for bigfoot. He was a member of the 1961 Harvard-Peabody expedition to Netherlands New Guinea. He helped gather the first underwater footage of great white sharks. He wrote meticulous natural histories full of empirical observation (on cranes, tigers, shorebirds, elephants) — and yet, at the same time, he remained steadfastly open to larger mysteries, the ineffable questions of existence.

In 1973, following the death of his second wife from cancer, Matthiessen set out with George Schaller, a renowned field biologist, to trek 250 miles through Nepal to the Crystal Mountain in Inner Dolpo. Schaller was searching for the Himalayan blue sheep. Matthiessen, his eyes set on Shey Gumpa (the Crystal Monastery), was searching for something more intangible: enlightenment, symbolized by the elusive snow leopard.

TRUE NATURE begins with a recreation of this extraordinary trek: *“a true pilgrimage,”* as Matthiessen called it, “a journey of the heart.”

Photos - original archive from the 1973 expedition, courtesy of George Schaller.









A one-off expedition is being organised to retrace Matthiessen and Schaller's footsteps in Dolpo, travelling through the same villages that their 1973 expedition visited, many of which remain well off the tourist trekking map.

This expedition is being undertaken by Nomadic Skies Expeditions, a developmental travel company that works directly with communities in Dolpo, as well as the writer Lance Richardson.

Richardson will be undertaking this journey as part of his research for the first major biography of the enigmatic and often perplexing Matthiessen, to be published internationally by imprints of Penguin Random House.





## This will be a trekking journey unlike any other. You will:

- Explore a breathtaking Himalayan mountain landscape on foot within Nepal's largest (but least visited) national park, Shey Phoksundo;
- Travel through remote villages of Hindu culture to the Tibetan cultural lands of pre-buddhist Bon Religion, visiting remote peoples seldom encountered by foreign groups;
- Link up with local leaders, villagers, lamas and traditional healers to gain an unprecedented insight into the culture and life of both Lower and Upper Dolpo;
- Undertake a literary exploration by following in Matthiessen and Schaller's exact footsteps, and gain an understanding of their perceptions, observations and opinions of the area and people, aided by Matthiessen's biographer, who will write about this trek in his upcoming book;
- Traverse the iconic devil's path beside the ethereal emerald Lake Phoksundo;
- Cross the Kang La Pass (5350M) to the Crystal Monastery of Shey Gumpa at the foot of the sacred Crystal Mountain, one of Buddhism's most holy mountains.







# YOUR JOURNEY

14th September to 6th October 2021

## Day 1: Tuesday 14th September 2021

### Arrival in KATHMANDU

The full group will arrive in Kathmandu by the evening of 13th September. We will be staying at the boutique Thamel Villa Hotel, an oasis within Kathmandu's liveliest and most dynamic area.

## Day 2: Wednesday 15th September 2021

### KATHMANDU

While trekking permits are being organised, we will explore the spiritual and Buddhist areas of Kathmandu, providing context for our deeper journey into the Bon religion of Dolpo. Places include:

- The temples of the ancient Patan Durbar Square;
- Bhudanath Stupa, the largest Buddhist stupa in Kathmandu, as well as the Dolpo artist Tenzin Norbu's studio near the Stupa;
- Swayambhunath, the fabled monkey temple, which we will visit in the evening as the monkeys take over the place, and an intimate candle-lit ceremonies commences as the sun drops over the city.

We will hold our first group meal in a boutique restaurant that is supporting architectural conservation in Kathmandu. We will spend our second night at Thamel Villa Hotel.

## Day 3: Thursday 16th September 2021

### KATHMANDU to NEPALGUNJ by air

After packing, we shall travel to Kathmandu's domestic airport to take a short early afternoon one-hour flight to Nepalgunj, a small town close to the Indian border that will be our departure point for Dolpo early the next day. In Nepalgunj, we will host a presentation and discussion on Dolpo (by Gavin Anderson) and on Peter Matthiessen (by Lance Richardson) and the journey Matthiessen and Schaller took to the Crystal Mountain.

Night at Siddhartha Hotel, Nepalgunj.

## Day 4: Friday 17th September 2021

### NEPALGUNJ – JUPHAL by air and trek to the Thuli Bheri River Camp (2-3 hours) Arriving in JUPHAL at 2500M and descending to our river camp at 2150M

A very early morning start to catch a dawn flight on a 20-seater Twin Otter plane to the landing strip at Juphal. We will be met by our full support team in Juphal. While luggage is being organised on mules, we will undertake a safety and camp organisation discussion. We will then explore Juphal and the surrounding villages and visit local elders to hear about the culture of the local villagers who Matthiessen, perhaps mistakenly, called 'Thakuri folk':

*'Neither Buddhism or Hinduism has displaced the old religions of the Thakuri folk in their primitive temple to Masta. Brutal human effigies in wood protect the low stone huts.'*

*Matthiessen, 20th October 1973*







We will endeavour to understand more of the non-Hindu, non-Buddhist beliefs of the local villages, and the meaning of the wooden effigies noted by Matthiessen that still adorn houses today. We will then undertake a short trek through the mountain villages to the banks of the Thuli Bheri River, where we shall pitch our first camp.

#### **Day 5: Saturday 18th September 2021**

**Trek to the little visited village of RAHAGAON (4 – 5 hours)  
Ascending 750M to 2800M**

We will cross the Thuli Bheri River by suspension bridge and enter the Shey Phoksundo National Park. We will then leave the main trail to ascend above the Suli Gad River and meet the trail that Matthiessen and Schaller took through villages that have seldom been visited by foreign groups. We will arrive at the village of Rahagaon, where the 1973 expedition camped.

*'Rahagaon on the mountainside has a majestic prospect down the valley of the Suli Gad to the snow peaks in the western reach of Dhaulagiri'*  
Matthiessen, 20th October 1973

Matthiessen writes that 'one enters the dark ages in Rahagaon,' and we will endeavour to understand how Rahagaon has changed since the 1973 expedition.

#### **Day 6: Sunday 19th September 2021**

**Trek to CHHEPKA Village (4 hours)  
Descending 120M to 2680M**

After exploring the Rahagaon area, we will continue in the footsteps of the 1973 expedition and drop down to re-join the main trail at the homestead of Shyangta, and from there to the banks of the Suli Gad River.

*'the trail meets the Suli Gad high up in the valley in grottoes of bronze lichen boulders and a shady riverside of pine and walnut and warm banks of fern'*  
Matthiessen, 21st October 1973

We will then follow the banks of the Suli Gad to the village of Chhepka. This village is not referenced by Matthiessen because it is a newer settlement, built after 1973. We will find out more about the history of this village and its links to other areas of Dolpo.

#### **Day 7: Monday 20th September 2021**

**Trek to Rechi Village (5-6 hours)  
Ascending 330M to 3010M**

We will follow the 1973 Expedition's route up the majestic Suli Gad River with its crashing turquoise waters, a river that Matthiessen enthuses about:

*'Where morning sun lights the red leaves and dark still conifers, the river sparkles in the forest shadow; turquoise and white, it thunders past spray-shined boulders, foaming pools, in the long rocky chute of broken rapids...I wonder if anywhere on earth there is a river more beautiful than the upper Suli Gad in early Autumn'*  
Matthiessen, October 21st 1973

We will criss-cross the Suli Gad and pass the 1973 expedition's forest camp and stay a short distance away at the village of Rechi. Matthiessen did not register the existence of Rechi (the path passes on the opposite banks). But he did raise concerns for the future of the forest when he spots a 'settler' across the river cutting the forest (probably a Rechi villager). We will meet with locals and elders in Rechi and find out more about the village and conservation of the forest and natural environment in this area as well as the history and modern life in this unique village.

#### **Day 8: Tuesday 21st September 2021**

##### **Trek to RIKE Village/MADUWA - 'MURWA' Village in The Snow Leopard (3-4 hours) Ascent of 290M to 3300M**

We will ascend the upper gorge of the Suli Gad and pass the spot where Matthiessen had mused on a fleeting and shadowy sighting:

*'Near a fork where a tributary stream flows down from the B'on village of Pungmo the deep forest across the torrent has been parted by avalanche, and on this brushy slope, a dark shape jumps behind a boulder. The slope is in bright morning sun, but I glimpse the creature only for an instant. It is much too big for a red panda, too covert for a musk deer, and much quicker than a bear.'*  
Matthiessen, October 22nd 1973

This sighting is the trigger for Matthiessen's future fascination with the Himalayan Yeti and North American Bigfoot. We continue north and enter the broader Mduwa Khola Valley with its high peaks and glaciated valleys. We will pass the Taprizza school, which is the only

school in the Phoksundo area. Our trek then diverts again from the main trekking route and we ascend towards the spectacular and little visited village Tibetan village of Rike. We have now truly entered the land of Bon; prayer flags will greet our arrival. We are following in the footsteps of the 1973 expedition as it ascended to Phoksundo and Matthiessen passed this way, staying at 'Murwa' (Meduwa or Rike) on his return from Shey Gumpa. Meduwa is now an empty and deserted village, but neighbouring Rike is a beautiful and friendly settlement where very few foreign groups visit.

*'On a long slope, in buckwheat fields is the settlement called Murwa ... their stone houses and fields are well ordered and well kept. The sunny hillside is protected all around by snow peaks and down the high wall to the west roars the great waterfall from Phoksundo lake.'*  
Matthiessen, October 22nd 1973

We will camp within the village and explore the location, with elders acting as our guides. We are now in snow leopard country, and the village will tell us more about recent sightings. On other expeditions we have spotted snow leopard tracks close to this village. We can ascend to a spectacular viewpoint where we have the potential to glimpse the turquoise waters of Lake Phoksundo and explore the now deserted village of Meduwa, where Matthiessen stayed. We will spend the later afternoon and evening with locals learning about the life, history and challenges of this remote village.





## Day 9: Wednesday 22nd September 2021

### Trek to RINGMO by LAKE PHOKSUNDO (3-4 hours)

#### Ascending 550M over a 3850m pass and then to RINGMO at 3700M

We will leave Rike and cross the Meduwa Khola River by traditional wooden bridge and tackle a steep ascent over a 3850M pass and so into the Phoksundo lake basin. We gain spectacular views across to the Kanjirowa and Dhaulagiri mountain ranges and drop towards Ringmo, seeing the other-worldly, turquoise Lake Phoksundo. We will be entering Ringmo village exactly 47 years and 11 months after the 1973 expedition arrived in Ringmo, passing the same chortens that Matthiessen and Schaller passed and into a village which still retains its Tibetan and traditional character:

*'From a distance, Ring-mo looks like a fortress in a tale, for the walls are built up like battlements by winter brushwood stacked on the flat roofs...down the path towards two white entrance stupas. The stupas ringed and decorated in warm red are fat and lopsided.'*

*Matthiessen, October 22nd 1973*

Matthiessen feels intimidated and unsettled by the Ringmo-pa (people of Ringmo) and The Snow Leopard refers to the 'Ring-mos' and B'on-pos' in frequently negative terms. This partial view was potentially exacerbated by the 1973 expedition's inability to communicate with the Tibetan speaking people, the locals' unwillingness to cease harvest and winter preparations to provide portage to the expedition and possibly usual etiquette in greetings not being followed. The warmth and friendliness of the people of Ringmo-pa

will be in stark contrast to the perceptions of Matthiessen and Schaller. We will visit the spectacular Trasung Choeling Gompa (Bon Monastery), where we will meet the senior Lamas and explore the Bon religion. We will hope to experience some of the festivals and ceremonies of the monastery and spend part of the evening in traditional homes sampling Tibetan hospitality. Our camp for the next 3 nights will be beside the stunning turquoise Lake Phoksundo.

## Days 10 and 11: Thursday 23rd and Friday 24th September 2021

### Exploration of Ringmo and the surrounding area (acclimatisation)

We will spend 2 full days in Ringmo and explore the village and surrounding area. Ringmo is a cultural hub on the routes between Upper and lower Dolpo and a vibrant community and culture. We will have a chance to meet the local Amchi – a Tibetan herbalist healer who will explain traditional healing and take those who are interested on a walking tour of the hills and forests around Ringmo to explain the harvesting and use of plants for traditional medicinal purposes. In the village, we will explore more with the locals and gain insights into the vibrant culture of Ringmo that very few trekking groups are given. For those interested, there will be a potential ascent with a local guide to the high rock pastures above Ringmo, the habitat of Bharal (blue sheep) and the snow leopard, with panoramic views across the neighbouring mountains and glaciated peaks – this will also assist with acclimatisation.



## Day 12: Saturday 25th September 2021

### Trek to PHOKSUNDO KHOLA Camp (6-7 hours)

#### Ascent to around 4000M and dropping to 3900M

We will leave Ringmo by the spectacular Devils Path – a path that is carved into the precipitous western rock face of Lake Phoksundo. Matthiessen feared this route, which appears to have been more precarious in 1973 than it is today. Nevertheless, the first sight of the Devil's Path is rather daunting (but much easier than it appears from a distance) as Matthiessen commented almost 47 years earlier:

*'I dread the narrow ledge around the west walls of Phoksundo that we must follow for two miles or more tomorrow. The ledge is visible from Ring-mo, and even GS was taken aback by the first sight of it'*  
Matthiessen, 24th October 1973

This stunning route takes us past a glaciated valley and up to a high mountain viewpoint above the lake. The route is the main path connecting Lower and Upper Dolpo and used by numerous yak caravans, so certainly not as precarious as Matthiessen found the first section:

*'Parts of the ledge have fallen away, and the gaps are bridged by flimsy scaffoldings of saplings. Certain sections are so narrow and precarious that more than once my legs refuse to move, and my heart beats so that I feel sick... The second mile of the ledge path is pleasant, and I am able to enjoy the mythic view. Below lies the turquoise lake that has never known paddle or sail.'*  
Matthiessen, October 25th 1973

We will drop back to the northern lake shore and begin to follow the Northern Phoksundo Khola (River), entering a stark area of tundra-like desert. We will strike a wild camp within the valley.

## Day 13: Sunday 26th September 2021

### Trek to the NAGDALO LA (KANG LA) base camp (7 to 8 hours)

#### Ascent to 4400M ascent 600M

The 1973 expedition encountered significant difficulties in ascending the Nagdalo La (also known as the Kang-La) pass. They lost their reluctant Ringmo porters encountered deep snow fields after unseasonably early snow falls and lost the path. The expedition spent from October 26th to 31st getting to Shey Gompa. We will certainly expect an easier ascent, and will ascend to the Nagdalo La base camp to acclimatise to altitude, ready for the ascent over the pass the following day. We will try to identify the locations where the 1973 expedition floundered and camped, endeavouring to understand more about the hardships encountered by Matthiessen and Schaller almost 47 years earlier.







#### **Day 14: Monday 27th September 2021**

**Trek over the NAGDALO LA (KANG LA)  
pass to SHEY GOMPA (7 to 8 hours)  
Ascending the 5350M pass (950M ascent)  
and descending to 4350 (1000M descent)**

We will ascend the Nagdalo La pass (the highest point of our expedition) then drop to the remote Shey Gompa monastery – the goal of both our journey and the 1973 expedition. Matthiessen and Schaller found the monastery deserted, but we will expect to meet the resident lamas and local residents in the area. We will gain our first view of the sacred Crystal Mountain:

*'High to the west, a white pyramid sails on the sky – the Crystal mountain. In summer, this monument of rock is a shrine for pilgrims from all over Dolpo and beyond, who come here to make a prescribed circle around the Crystal Mountain and attend a holy festival at Shey'*  
Matthiessen, 1st November 1973

This will be our base for 3 nights to explore the monastery and surrounding area. It is an area that clearly captured Matthiessen and Schaller:

*'There is so much that enchants me in this spare, silent place that I move softly so as not to break a spell... For the first time since September, GS [George Schaller] is entirely happy. Like myself, he is stunned by Shey, which has more than repaid the long, hard journey'*  
Matthiessen, 3rd and 4th November 1973

#### **Days 15 and 16: Tuesday 28th September and Wednesday 29th September 2021**

**Exploring SHEY GOMPA and the surrounding area**

We will spend 2 days exploring Shey Gompa and the surrounding area. We will consult local lamas and villagers to understand how the monastery has changed since 1973, and more about the annual festival and the circumnavigation of Crystal Mountain. We can ascend to the viewpoints and hills above Shey to spot Bharal. One of the days we can travel further north to the rock monastery of Tsakhung Gompa (featured in the 1999 Eric Valli film, Himalaya), returning after exploring this impressive religious centre.

### **THE RETURN JOURNEY**

#### **Day 17: Thursday 30th September 2021**

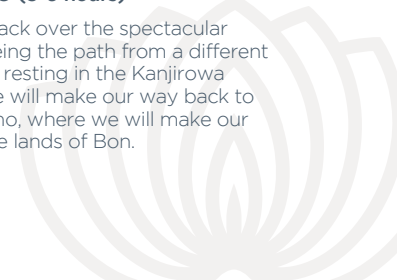
**Return to PHOKSUNDO KHOLA (7-8 hours)**

We will return over the Nagdalo La (Kang La) pass, dropping towards the Phoksundo Khola valley where we shall make camp.

#### **Day 18: Friday 1st October 2021**

**Trek to RINGMO (5-6 hours)**

We will travel back over the spectacular Devil's Path, seeing the path from a different angle, and after resting in the Kanjirowa glacial valley we will make our way back to friends in Ringmo, where we will make our final camp in the lands of Bon.



### **Day 19: Saturday 2nd October 2021**

#### **Trek to SHYANGTA (7-8 hours)**

Our route from Ringmo will take us on a different path from our ascent, climbing above Ringmo to a spectacular viewpoint over the Phoksundo waterfall. Then we will descend through a winter village (where people from Upper Dolpo spend the winter months) and back into the Suli Gad gorge and valley, all the way to the homestead of Shyangta, where we will make camp.

### **Day 20: Sunday 3rd October 2021**

#### **Trek to JUPHAL (7-8 hours)**

Our final trekking day will take us down the lower riverside paths of the Suli Gad, passing through winter villages and Nepali communities back to the Thuli Bheri. We will then make our final ascent to the village of Juphal, camping at a local tea house. That evening we will celebrate with our travel companions who will be staying in Dolpo after our departure.

### **Day 21: Monday 4th October 2021**

#### **Flights to NEPALGUNJ and on to KATHMANDU**

We will rise early in the morning to catch the small plane back to Nepalgunj and then transit onto a plane to Kathmandu, where we should arrive by early afternoon. The comfort of the Thamel Villa Hotel with hot showers and soft beds will be awaiting.

### **Day 22: Tuesday 5th October 2021**

#### **KATHAMANUDU and BHAKTAPUR**

For those who wish, we will arrange a visit to nearby Bhaktapur – the third city of the Kathmandu valley and an area of stunning ancient temples and fascinating artisanal activity. Our final expedition dinner will be organised in Kathmandu to mark the end of the expedition. We will spend our final night in the Thamel Villa Hotel.

(N.B. – this extra day in Kathmandu is important to provide some flexibility in case any flights are delayed returning from Dolpo)

### **Day 23: Wednesday 6th October 2021**

#### **Departure from KATHMANDU**







# LOGISTICS & ORGANISATION

## GROUP SIZE AND ORGANISATION

- 8 external participants will be invited to join the expedition
- Participants need to be active and fit walkers with experience of multi-day treks
- The expedition will be led by nomadic Skies founders Gavin Anderson and Jigme Lama and accompanied and supported by Lance Richardson
- The expedition may also be accompanied by a documentary film maker and participants must be happy to be filmed during the journey
- The expedition will be fully supported by camp staff and cook and portorage will be provided by mule.

## THE EXPEDITION INCLUDES:

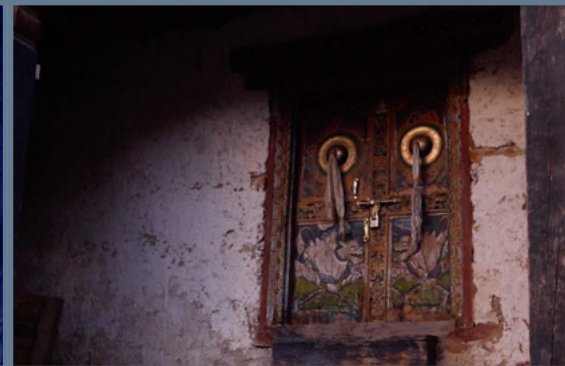
- Airport transfers in Nepal
- Evening meals in Kathmandu
- Four nights bed and breakfast accommodation in Kathmandu
- One night bed and breakfast in Nepalgunj (en route to Dolpo)
- Internal flights from Kathmandu to Dolpo return
- 17 nights fully supported and equipped camp trekking (clients bring their own four-season sleeping bags)
- Full catering (breakfast, lunch and dinner) provided by a camp cook during the time in Dolpo
- Portorage of baggage and equipment by mule during the trek
- All trekking fees and permits

## THE EXPEDITION DOES NOT INCLUDE:

- International flights to Kathmandu (advice can be provided on this)
- Tourist visa entry charge (US\$50)
- Lunch during the four days in Kathmandu
- Alcoholic and carbonated drinks
- Tips and gratuities for guides and porters (tipping guides and porters is a usual custom in Nepal)
- Personal travel insurance (to cover ascending to 5500M and emergency helicopter rescue)

***Nomadic Skies is a member of the UK Travel Trust Association (TTA - membership number Q6609) and all payments for the expedition are 100% consumer protected until successful completion of the expedition.***






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