

## **Ghandruk: A village straight out of fairytales**

Ghandruk is a traditional Gurung village in Kaski Gandaki Province. It is home to a Gurung museum and is said to have one of the best views of Annapurna South, Gangapurna, Annapurna III, Hiunchuli, and Machhapuchhre. It probably did, but we couldn't see the mountains because it rained while we were there, and the sky was very cloudy.

We planned to take a bus from Pokhara to Nayapul and hike to Ghandruk. My online research said it is a beginner-friendly hike and could be done in 6 hours. Fortunately or unfortunately, it was 2 pm when we reached Nayapul, and it was too late. As Kasturi said, Google said 6 hours is for normal people; Ananya and I would have taken 9 hours.

However, The bus ride wasn't any less of an adventure. I bumped my head twice on the roof of the bus. I have so much respect for the mountain bus drivers; the roads are so narrow, to be honest, there isn't much road; it's a muddy path, and there were times I thought that it was by god's grace that the bus didn't fall off the road. But it was also probably the most beautiful bus ride I've ever taken. We had a little halt at a cute little village: Nayapul. Our bus passing through the village reminded me of Hanoi Street. It was that tight. The bus almost touched the fruits and other things that were hung in front of the shops.

The bus ride was supposed to be only 2 hours, but it took us 4 as it had rained a few days back and there had been landslides. But I wouldn't have complained even if the ride took us 10 hours (okay, maybe I would have); Ghandruk is so gorgeous. I had seen a few pictures online but didn't have many expectations. Instead of chasing the sunset, I chased the viewpoint to get a picture similar to the one I'd seen on Pinterest. In the process, I got attacked by a leech. And I did what anyone else would do: I screamed. Poor Ananya had to get it off me. Spoiler alert: she had to do it 2 more times. She says I attract leeches. Unfortunately, I can't disagree.

On our first day, we walked around the village looking for the viewpoint. And how can I forget, while I got attacked by a leech, Ananya had her little adventure with buffaloes. Ghandruk looks like a village straight out of a fairytale. The well-paved pathways are what I love the most. The streets are incredibly narrow, with stone houses on both sides and sometimes just fields. And everything is green, so many beautiful shades of green. I returned and told a friend that I had probably exhausted my quota of greenery in the 2 days we spent in Ghandruk.

We planned to leave the following day but decided to stay. I mean, it was a no-brainer. We stayed at Asish Ama Homestay, a cute little place with 2 adorable girls who ran the place. They didn't speak much Hindi, but we somehow managed with our exceptional skills, of course. Ghandruk is full of homestays. I won't be exaggerating if I say that every alternate building is a homestay.

However, most of these buildings are traditional Gurung houses made of wood and stone. The village has yet to be commercialized. And there is so much beauty in that.

On the second day, we went looking for the infamous Gurung Cottage. And honestly, we were disappointed. Now, that looked like a tourist hotspot, with people dressed in Gurung costumes, clicking pictures. And as the sky was cloudy, we couldn't even see the Annapurna range. I believe that Gurung Cottage is overrated. The Gurung Museum was disappointing, too. It was just a room with some artifacts and an entry fee, which wasn't worth it.

Next, we went looking for the tea gardens. This was a long hike through the Old Ghandruk village, Dandagaun. While the hike to the tea gardens was beautiful, the tea gardens could have been better. Again, that is because it's not the right season. The tea plants had been trimmed. The steps that lead to the temple through the tea garden are beautiful. I got attacked by the third leech here. We struggled very much to climb them, but they did give us a sense of accomplishment. (And also a reality check. We have the stamina of a fat cow.)

We didn't see many tourists around. The only tourists we saw were Nepali families. We met an adorable family returning from the tea garden who went to help us. They were also surprised that we were 2 girls from India traveling alone. So was our bus driver. He told us we were brave.

Someone told us that it's the off-season now. We were disappointed that we didn't meet any new people, but for me, the beauty of the village made up for it. Ghandruk is the most beautiful place I've ever been to. And I hope it remains so. I hope it remains automobile-free and as green as it is now.