

The chime of the nearby temple bell rings through the morning mists and cuts through the rumble of Defenders (two Tdi models and a TDCi) as we check over the Land Rovers for the day ahead. It's a beautiful morning at our base, the British Gurkha Camp at Bheri in western Nepal, and we've been exploring the Himalayan ranges in the north of this beautiful and welcoming country for almost two weeks now.

I'm here with Cornish LRO reader Miles Chadwick, who runs Land Rovers Overland in Kathmandu, and his team. We've been checking some routes through the mountains that Miles wants to use with his tours business, and this has led to some amazing experiences along the way.

We left home base in Kathmandu in a red TDCi 110 called Ruby, and headed west along the Trishuli Valley to the town of Pokhara. Traffic in Kathmandu is chaotic and the big 110 carved confidently through the swirling madness, heading down towards

the open country that leads through the valley to the mountains.

We were set to change vehicles in Pokhara and meet up with some other Land Rovers as well, but for now the job was a return visit to the isolated, dramatic Temple of Muktinath, the Temple of the Eternal Flame, high in the Thorong La Pass to the north.

I'd visited it before, last winter, again in Ruby, and fallen in love with it. At almost 13,000 feet up in the Himalayas, Muktinath is an amazing place. Said to be the haunt of skydancer goddesses, or dakinis, Muktinath is a Buddhist temple built round a sacred site.

It is believed to be the only place on earth where the five elements – earth, sky, air, fire and water – are found together. A flame of natural gas burns from a cleft in the rock, from which also pours a spring of water. It's really quite something.

To reach Muktinath, one of the holiest shrines of both Buddhism and Hinduism, Ruby the Defender took us deep into the planet's crust along the Kali Gandaki – the world's deepest valley. Running between the

mountains of Annapurna and Dhaulagiri, the Gandaki river flows from Tibet along the Mustang Valley to the Ganges in India, and we followed it from Pokhara north along the Kali Gandaki Gorge.

Quickly the tarmac turned to gravel, and then to hard-packed earth before vanishing altogether, and we wild-camped in the gorge itself, bivvi-ing next to the river.

The trail to Muktinath led steeply upwards after several crossings of the Gandaki river itself, and we tested the wading depth of the snorkel-less TDCi several times while wading the wide, icy, fast-flowing glacial waters, but she didn't miss a beat.

Passing from tropical jungle and into pineforest as we gained altitude, climbing up the side of the Annapurna range, we eventually left the treeline altogether and moved into a lunar-looking landscape, too high and cold for trees to survive. The Land Rover bounced across rocks on the huge plain surrounded by massive mountains as we climbed ever higher. Eventually we reached the Temple, high and remote

22



British Gurkha Camp at Bheri, base for rest and vehicle checks



Children took great interest in the convoy in every village



Stelvio Pass? Pah! Welcome to some proper switchbacks