

HOME TREKKING IN LOCKDOWN

By Nick Gray



Lockdown in Leamington Spa - Nick Gray

When a few years ago the phone calls offering work as a freelance documentary-maker became scarcer, I felt able to fulfil a long-held ambition to join trekking expeditions in some of the world's most picturesque places: the Himalayas, Morocco, Mount Sinai, the Pyrenees, Myanmar, the Simien Mountains of Ethiopia, and Mount Kailash in Tibet. Now, after years of trial and error, I have successfully assembled all the correct gear: the safest boots, the most effective mattress, technologically the most advanced head-torch, watch, anorak, and trekking poles. I have haunted the outdoor clothing shops selecting the best from the range of Mammut, Scarpa, Patagonia, Rab. In December I invested in a new pair of hiking boots, and earlier this year booked treks in the Derbyshire Dales, a week along the South West Coast Path, and was planning a Last Hurrah to the Annapurna in Nepal. And what happens? Lockdown!

Forty years in television has taught me that when the planning and arrangements go pear-shaped, don't panic - improvise. The government instructions stated that we can only leave the house for a few limited reasons. One was for a period of exercise - cycling, jogging or walking. A plan formed. I will go trekking...from home.

On organised treks abroad, there is a set pattern to the day. An early start when you pack up your bedding and gear into a bag for the porters (who also take down and carry your tent) is followed by a substantial breakfast. Then boots are laced up, rucksacks shouldered, and you set off into the wide, blue yonder. So since mid-March, as the coronavirus cuts a terrible swathe through the population, I rise early, make everything shipshape, have a serious breakfast, pack a rucksack, put on boots, grab the trekking poles, and set off from our back door in Royal Leamington Spa. For me the river Leam is the mighty Irrawaddy, nearby Hunningham Church (built c. 1200) the Potala Palace, and the Campion Hills (Max. Alt. 85 m.) are the foothills of the Himalayas.

OK I never go far. With neither pub nor picnic permitted, I have to be home for lunch. But a few miles a day in usually fine weather is full of interest. I have discovered new trails through lovely Warwickshire countryside. And although on a high-altitude trek there are new vistas each day, following the same walks from home brings fresh delights. Over the weeks I have been able to note the changes that spring has wrought: the may blossom swelling on the hedges, the bluebells resplendent in the woods. And the assorted wildlife is a wonder: glorious kingfishers, herons, muntjac deer, even an occasional otter. I have been able to witness cygnets hatch, newborn lambs thrive, and kestrels stoop. As the roads are near silent, the birdsong can be almost deafening.

In my full-on Alpine hiking gear, I must cut an incongruous figure. The trekking poles are remarked on by passers-by, but they are especially useful when it is necessary to indicate the required 2-metre social distance to, for example, a group of oncoming joggers. There have been days when I don't feel much like booting up and stepping out, but I have only to recall the encouraging words of a Nepali sirdar who led a trek in the Himalayas. Facing a daunting ascent, he would say: "With positive thinking, Mister Nick, you can make it!" The new hiking boots were soon worn in.

A few miles a day adds up. Actually, the app on my phone adds it up. After the first weeks, I found a way of checking how many miles I had walked in a month. It added up to 200. Impressive! How far was that? Further than York - that is 143 miles. More than Middlesbrough - 190. Where in this country is 200 miles away from Royal Leamington Spa? The answer: Durham. I had walked the distance to Durham without breaking any of the government's lockdown instructions.



Cygnets



A Warwickshire Way



Grey Heron



The River Leam