



SECOND ANNUAL LAWUDO TREK OFFERS US\$25,500 TO LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE'S CAVE AND MONASTERY

All of us in front of Lawudo Gompa, with, centre, Ven. Robina; Rinpoche's brother Sangay-la, Lawudo's director; Rinpoche's sister Ani Samten-la, who runs the place year round; all the kind staff, our guides and porters who also pitched in throughout the retreat. Photo Kate Macdonald.

Our second Lawudo Trek, again led by Venerable Robina Courtin, brought all thirty-two trekkers safely up to Lawudo for our five-day retreat at Lama Zopa Rinpoche's cave and retreat centre, nearly 14,000 feet above sea level in the lower Himalayas.

Held in early Spring, March 14–28 this year, we offered the usual \$500 for each participant, as well as another \$9,000, totalling \$25,500. Half the proceeds go into Rinpoche's own fund to develop his vision of a Guru Rinpoche Pure Land there and half will be used by Rinpoche's brother, Sangay-la, who runs Lawudo, for day-to-day maintenance and development.

Sangay-la has already spent \$3,000 of it on new mattresses and other items, as well as \$1,500 towards improving Lawudo's water supply. We learned a lot from the popularity and success of

last year's trek, so it was exciting to plan and prepare again this year, having a much clearer idea of what to expect.

I remembered my inspiration during the November Course in 2014 at Kopan Monastery, watching Ven. Tenzin Namdrol's slide show of her first journey to Lawudo, that kicked off the motivation to organise the first trek. I can say now that working with our team to put all the pieces

“Last year was the first time I ever walked up a mountain. I thought I must be crazy to do it again!”

- Ven Robina



together in 2017 was like a big experiment with good intentions.

But I never thought I would have the opportunity to visit a second time. I'm so pleased that we did it all over again and were able to continue the momentum to raise more money and awareness for Lawudo.

This year Ven. Robina kindly offered to lead the Lawudo Trek again. "Last year was the first time I ever walked up a mountain. I thought I must be crazy to do it again! Rinpoche told me last year, 'You'll never want to come back!' But I'm afraid I did!" I was so happy when I first heard her refer to the trek as "the Second Annual Lawudo Trek."

We worked again with Amber Tamang the managing director of Three Jewels Adventures, and long-time guide for Effie Fletcher and Himalayan High Treks and Dharma Journeys in San Francisco. There were familiar Tamang faces from last year, Lok and Pemba, who are also Amber's cousins and Mingmar Sherpa. Mann, a guide from Pemba's village joined us for the first time this year. Our guides were joined by eleven porters, most also from the same village.

As we did last year, we began our journey at Kopan, Rinpoche's monastery in Kathmandu valley, with two days of teachings and relaxing. Serendipitously, some of us met Tenzin Rigsel Rinpoche there, the reincarnation of Lama Lhundrup, Kopan's former abbot, which made our stay even more blessed. Ven. Katy Cole, an



Some of us met Tenzin Rigsel Rinpoche, the reincarnation of Kopan's former abbot Lama Lhundrup, who was staying at Kopan at the time. To Rinpoche's left is a statue in the likeness of Lama Lhundrup. Photo Kristina Mah

“One foot in front of the other, people! Step by step, we'll get there! It's only the body! Keep a happy mind!”

~ Ven. Robina

Australian nun and volunteer meditation leader at Kopan, generously shared her experiences of her five trips to Lawudo.

When we arrived and the first two mornings at Kopan, the sky was covered with thick smog and cloud. We could barely see the city below the monastery. We were anxious about being able to fly



We were lucky to receive a teaching from Ven Robina in Rinpoche's beautiful room at Kopan. Photo Kristina Mah.



Ven. Robina and Craig setting up the water bowls on the stupa at the small town of Ghat. Photo Kristina Mah.



We set out from Lukla. Left to right: Zack, Craig, Ven. Robina, MaryEllen, Karen, Kate and Mingmar. Photo Doug Kirkpatrick.

out, especially me! Amazingly, on the night of the 15th, a huge clap of thunder startled me awake in bed at 1:30am. I let the sound of the heavy rain send me back to sleep. I knew the morning would be clear.

It was still dark at 5am, and our buses were early and waiting to drive us to the airport. We could see the stars and the air was filled with anticipation, but everyone was calm, happy and excited to start our journey. Booked on the second flight was a risk, given the recent weather and regular flight cancellations, but this morning was crystal clear and as the sun rose on the way to the airport, we could see the great mountain ranges in the distance. All went according to plan, and we all arrived at Lukla for breakfast by 9:30am.

We hit the track by 11 o'clock and were all at Phakding by three in the afternoon for the first of many *dhal bhat* lunches. The first day of walking can be quite a shock but encouragement was never far. "One foot in front of the other, people! Step by step, we'll get there! It's only the body! Keep a happy mind!" Ven. Robina often urged us in this way as we made our way to Rinpoche's holy cave.

It is hard to anticipate all of the challenges we would face in the Himalayas. Not only the altitude, but the dustiness, the uneven and steep mountain paths, no regular access to the Internet, remembering to filter our water, as well as other more intimate struggles, like few changes of clothes, coping with the physical exertions and the biting cold nights without heaters.

"It was so clear to me," Ven. Robina says, "that my suffering was simply because of attachment to comfort."

"It's only the body! Keep a happy mind!" she would repeat and inspire us. And she was right. We only had to take one look at the view at it would put things back into perspective.

"The walk up to Lawudo – step-by-step, the struggle, is one thing that remains clear in my mind," said MaryEllen. "Looking ahead at the path, sometimes it seemed impossible. The kind guides, carrying the burden too weighty for me, silently witnessing, their calm presence lending strength. Looking back down at my feet, there was enough for one more step, one more step, one more step, and then the day was over, and the struggle gone, like a long distant memory, like a dream."

"My body struggled to acclimatise during the first two days of the trek – aching calves, rapid heartbeat, and nausea," recalled Marcel. Nevertheless, like many of us, he realised there was so much to appreciate.

"The trek was an opportunity to look inward, patiently... It gave me a wonderful environment to look deeper and longer."

- Doug



Nadya spins one of the many prayer wheels on the walking track from Lukla. Photo Scott Johnson.

Casting his mind back to the trek, he reminisced, “the warmth and kindness among us and feeling the Dharma as a vibrant, visible tradition as I spun prayer wheels, paid homage to Buddha images, and greeted red-robed monks along the way...”

“For me, the trek was an opportunity to look inward, patiently,” thought Doug. “My day to day life is very connected to externalities, and while I set aside time to self-evaluate, the time for introspection is always limited and the outside world demands I resume my “place” fairly rapidly. The trek gave me a wonderful environment to look deeper and longer,” he explained.

As we walked, people found themselves repeating words like mantras with each step



All ready on the second day to walk from Phakding to Monjo. Photo Kate Macdonald.

forward. “Breathe. Just this. Keep going. Challenge. Conquer the mind. Silence. Gratitude,” were some of Karen’s walking words.

We were regularly passed by porters carrying enormous loads on their backs – sometimes “up to 200 pounds,” Amber said. “They have to compete with the donkeys for business,” he added. “That is why they put their bodies at such risk.” It was a constant reminder of the amount of human effort that goes into making our trek comfortable in the Everest Region.

Ewa said, “It was amazing to share this experience with our teacher, Ven. Robina, guides, porters, fellow trekkers, random strangers, owners



Pemba makes incense offerings from local plants – pine, rhododendron and booki flower. Photo Kristina Mah



Kate, next to the first stupa we stopped at to make offerings at Lukla. Photo Kristina Mah



*“Breathe. Just this.
Keep going. Challenge.
Conquer the mind.
Silence. Gratitude.”*

- Karen

of lodges, cooks... and others, including the rivers, mountains and donkeys! I felt like we had been here together before. I felt the sense of connectedness, love, care and responsibility for each other was mutual like a sense of belonging to the same family.”

On the morning of departure from Monjo, some of us, including Ven. Robina, realised that it wouldn't be possible to keep walking. For Ven. Robina, it was an old knee injury that had flared up. But she was determined to find a way to get to Lawudo and luckily Amber had already organised a helicopter pilot to be on stand-by for this trek. The smaller group was able to fly to Mende and wait for us, while the rest would walk steadily to Namche Bazaar to acclimatise there before the final walking day to Lawudo.

Ven. Robina had told us the incredible story of Harry, an American meditator who has a cave at Charok, close to Lawudo. Walking back one year, he had told her, at a particularly dangerous spot, “it's not uncommon for people to fall over the side of the cliff.” He noticed four porters were heading down right in front of him. Immediately he thought, “Oh,



Left to right: Katha and Sharon enjoying the sunshine close to Namche Bazaar. Photo Laura Carballo.



Right to left: Amber, Pemba, Mingmar, Mann and Lok, our kind and dedicated team of guides at Lawudo.

Photo Doug Kirkpatrick.

four of them, one of me – I'll step to the side,” which he did. Realising just how narrow the path was, he thought to himself “if they knock me I won't hold on.”

Well, they knocked him! And he didn't hold on! “I was falling backwards, and I had a psychic vision of the entire fall,” Harry told Ven. Robina. Then, amazingly, he “felt the hands of Geshe Lama Konchog pushing me” and he reversed direction and fell onto the track.

Apparently, Ven. Robina told us, back at Kopan when Rinpoche had heard that Harry was going up the mountains, he felt that Harry would die so had asked Geshe Lama Konchog to pray for him.

We all met at the base of the hill close to that spot. Our guides found dried baby rhododendron flowers, pine and *booki* flower to make incense to offer as we recited *The Heart Sutra*. We were very touched by the story, and I think it must have prepared us in some way for the steep climb all the way up to Namche at 11,400 feet above sea level.

It was a relief for us all to arrive later in the afternoon at Namche. We stayed again at Zamling Guesthouse, where Kami Sherpa, the owner's daughter remembered us, perhaps because of the purpose of our trek, and made us feel at home. Being physically apart from Ven. Robina didn't stop us from listening to teachings in the evening. We met with Ven. Robina virtually after dinner in the *gompa* – dialling in on FaceTime to



Taking a water break on the trail. Left to right: Sandy, Mingmar, Alison. Photo Kristina Mah.



We made offerings altogether at Furte Stupa in between Namche and Mende. Photo Kristina Mah.

respond to our Dharma questions. Everyone was in good spirits and glad to hear that those who were in Mende were safe and enjoying themselves.

Everyone delighted in taking a reenergising day to get used to the altitude and rest our bodies and minds. Many of us relaxed in the town, taking in the majestic views of Mount Everest and Lhotse or walking through the stone-paved streets of the bazaar. When the morning came, everyone met for breakfast with happy minds. Lawudo was the next stop!

Four hours later, we had a brief interlude of tea and biscuits when we were reunited with Ven. Robina and the four others at Mende. One more hour to go! Ani Samten, Rinpoche’s older sister—

“I felt the sense of connectednes, love, care and responsibility for each other was mutual like a sense of belonging to the same family.”

~ Ewa

who has been taking care of Lawudo for more than 50 years – greeted Ven. Robina and the rest of us at the gate. Both laughing, they walked in together and Anila offered tea. As each of us walked joyfully through the gate, the emotion became palpable.



Sarah and Devin leading prayers and The Heart Sutra while our guide prepared incense for offering. Photo Kristina Mah.



Left to right: Andreas, Marcel, Ewa and Kristina with a local boy Norbu Sherpa a few hundred meters from Monjo in the rain. Photo Lok Tamang.



Sangay-la came to Mende to greet Ven. Robina when she arrived by helicopter from Monjo.
Photo Kate Macdonald.



Ani Samten-la happily greeted Ven. Robina with a hug and a katag, and welcomed us back to her home.
Photo Kate Macdonald.

“...Feeling the Dharma as a vibrant, visible tradition as I spun prayer wheels, paid homage to Buddha images, and greeted red-robed monks along the way.”

- Marcel

Our trekking group consisted of 32 people of many different ages and backgrounds and there were hurdles we each had to overcome along the way, but

we had all arrived at this special place altogether. Amber says in his years of being a guide, this isn't an easy or common achievement.

“The trek to Lawudo showed me that I'm much more capable than I thought,” said Ewa. “Many times while trekking I looked back down below and I simply couldn't believe how high I had come on my own feet.”

Our retreat started that evening and continued for five nights and six days. The morning sun gave us the opportunity to hold the teachings after breakfast in front of Rinpoche's cave. Listening to the lam-rim teachings there made them feel more powerful and auspicious. And when the



One of our porters, Lakpa offers tea to Ewa on the last hill as we approach Lawudo. Photo Kristina Mah



Craig offered shade to those who passed him on the Mende hill to Lawudo while they caught their breath and took in the scenery. Here he is with Jim. Photo Kristina Mah



The dazzling Milk Way as seen from the steps in front of the gompa. Photo Scott Johnson.

chilly afternoon breeze came after lunch, we moved into the gompa and continued with the afternoon and evening sessions.

Again, this year, Sangay-la set up an outdoor kitchen and mess tent for our big group. He organised for extra help for Ani Samten-la in the kitchen, with Jetar, our head cook, Pemba, Nima, Durga, and Annalise, a volunteer from Switzerland to take care of us.

Lawudo is so special. According to MaryEllen, “... the crisp, clean air, the surrounds of mountain walls and peaks is unforgettable. The sky, an endless expanse of stars so close remains so brilliant you can see them through closed eyelids.” She decided to

practice in Rinpoche’s cave each night and remembers, “the indescribable peace, the silence after my prayers, the presence folding around me with the dark and the scent of incense. It was such a blessing. Now back again in the everyday, I recognise it is far from ordinary.”

“Keeping the mind on the right track every day during retreat was so invigorating, so inspiring,” said Ewa.

Ven. Robina reminded us of Rinpoche’s words, “We can only create merit when we make effort.” She read us from *Mahamudra: How to Discover Our True Nature*, Lama Yeshe’s latest book from Wisdom Publications coming out in September, and Geshe Lama Konchog’s biography. She shared these stories to continue to inspire us in our own practice.



Ven. Robina gave teachings in front of Rinpoche's cave every day in the sunshine. Photo Kate Macdonald.



Sharkey and Amber enjoying the good weather at Lawudo. Photo Kristina Mah.



*“Come back again and again.
And with more people!”*

~ Sangay-la

In the evenings, we enjoyed the warmth of the dining room with its traditional wood-fired stove and indulged in the delicious food that was prepared for us by the kitchen staff.

On the last day of the retreat, some of us took the Eight Mahayana Precepts as well as Refuge, the Five Lay Vows and the Bodhisattva Vows. Marcel felt that “taking the refuge and vows at the end was the most emotional experience for me. It ignited a fire in my belly to continue to study the teachings, watch my mind, and work on myself so I can be a better person for my benefits and the benefit of those around me.”

That evening would be our last session for the retreat. Craig had printed Ven. Robina’s long-life prayer, written by Lama Zopa Rinpoche at the request of a student and brought a copy of it for each of us. At the end of the teaching, Kate led us all in reciting it together. It was the perfect way to end our retreat. Sangay-la came to the gomba to offer a *katag* to Ven. Robina. He thanked us for coming again and happily encouraged us to “Come back again and again. And with more people!”

On the day of our departure, we gathered for a photo in front of the gomba and to offer Sangay-la the money raised this year. He seemed very pleased. His priority now more than ever is to complete the water project, he said. Two engineers in our group met with him to discuss how our trek could help with infrastructure to capture and store more rain and snow water and upgrading other facilities on the property. I’m so looking forward to continuing to support the fundraising, design and installation of these projects through the Lawudo Trek and other initiatives. We are already involved in organizing the fundraising, design and installation. News to come soon.

Back in Kathmandu, we went to Boudhanath Stupa for our last puja, circumambulated and listened to our last teaching before our farewell dinner that evening. Ven. Robina reminded us of



Top: *Relaxing outside the gomba in between teaching sessions. Left to right: Zack, Heather, Doug, MaryEllen, Jim, Sandy.*

Middle: *Our guides helped hang new prayer flags after a monthly puja was done by local monks from Thamo.*

Bottom: *Sangay-la set up an outdoor kitchen for our big group. Here is our head cook Jetar preparing potatoes.*

Photos Kristina Mah.



Ven. Robina in her outside office; she discovered this is where the best internet connection is. Photo Kate Macdonald.

enthusiasm and perseverance in our practice and to never give up working on our minds.

While we were at the dinner table that evening, everyone in the group spoke of their immediate response to their experience on the trek. It was so moving to listen to everyone's words. It was clear that people were overwhelmed with the harmony and camaraderie of the group and the unique experience being part of this trek and retreat at such an extraordinary place.

After dessert, Ven. Robina offered each of us a *mala* from Lawudo. And we each wrote a postcard to friends of Ven. Robina's in prisons in the US, Australia and the UK.



Sangay-la offered a katag to Ven. Robina and thanked us for visiting Lawudo. Photo Nadya Caminer.



In the evenings we enjoyed the warmth of the dining room with its traditional wood-fired stove in the middle of the dining room. Photo Kristina Mah

“This is the best kind trekking. It’s the most beneficial”.

~ Sangay-la

I have to echo Sangay-la's words from 2017 that I have remained in my mind – “So many people come to Nepal to go trekking and never see or do anything related to Dharma. You came for a trek, and you came to Lawudo, a peaceful and beautiful place to do retreat. This is the best kind trekking. It's the most beneficial”.



Left to right: Anne, Marcel, Nadya and Dominique after the refuge ceremony that took place in front of Rinpoche's holy cave. Photo Marguerite Sharkey.



Kristina with Ani Samten-la, who has looked after Lawudo for more than 50 years. Photo Andreas Ruf.

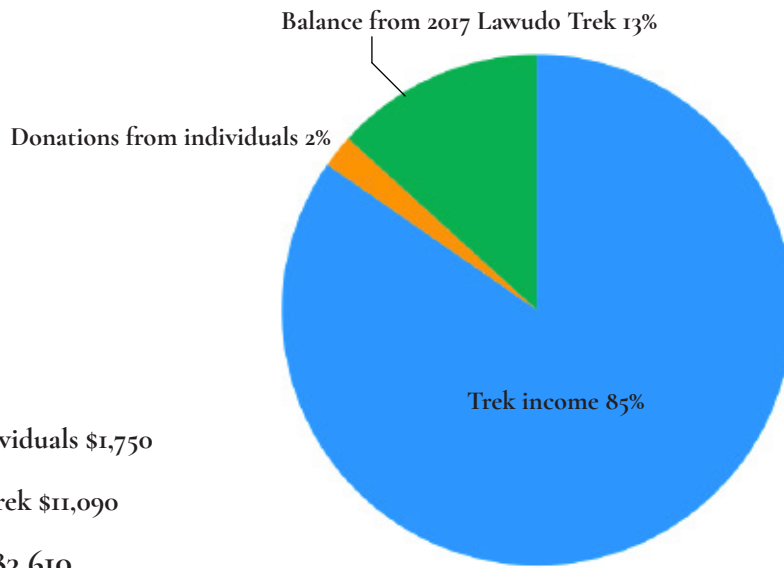
A billion thanks to Ven. Robina, Sangay-la, Ani Samten-la and helpers at Lawudo, the monks and nuns who worked with us at Kopan Monastery and Amber and his team. To all the wonderful people who came along for the ride; bringing their enthusiasm, support, care and kindness to each other, and all who helped us along the way to make this trek and retreat it so beneficial and amazing – Thank you.



Right column: Back at Kathmandu, we met at Boudhanath Stupa for our final puja. It was a wonderful and moving way to end the trek. Photos Kristina Mah.



2018 TREK INCOME



- Trek income \$70,770
- Donations from individuals \$1,750
- Balance from 2017 Trek \$11,090

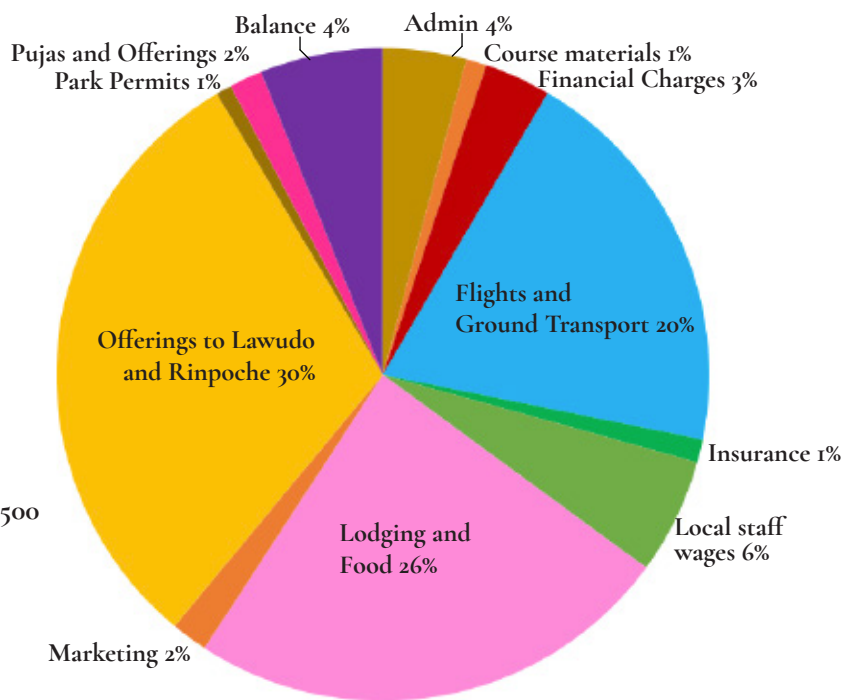
Total income = \$83,610

2018 TREK EXPENSES AND DONATIONS

- Administration \$3,458
- Course materials \$834
- Financial charges \$2,759
- Flights and ground transport \$16,484
- Insurance \$945
- Local staff wages \$4,804
- Lodging and food \$22,091
- Marketing \$1,513
- Donation to Rinpoche and Lawudo \$25,500
- Park permits \$640
- Pujas and offerings \$1,372

Total expenses = \$80,454

- Balance from 2018 Trek \$3,156



Join us for the Third Annual Lawudo Trek in 2019...





THIRD ANNUAL LAWUDO TREK

MARCH 2019

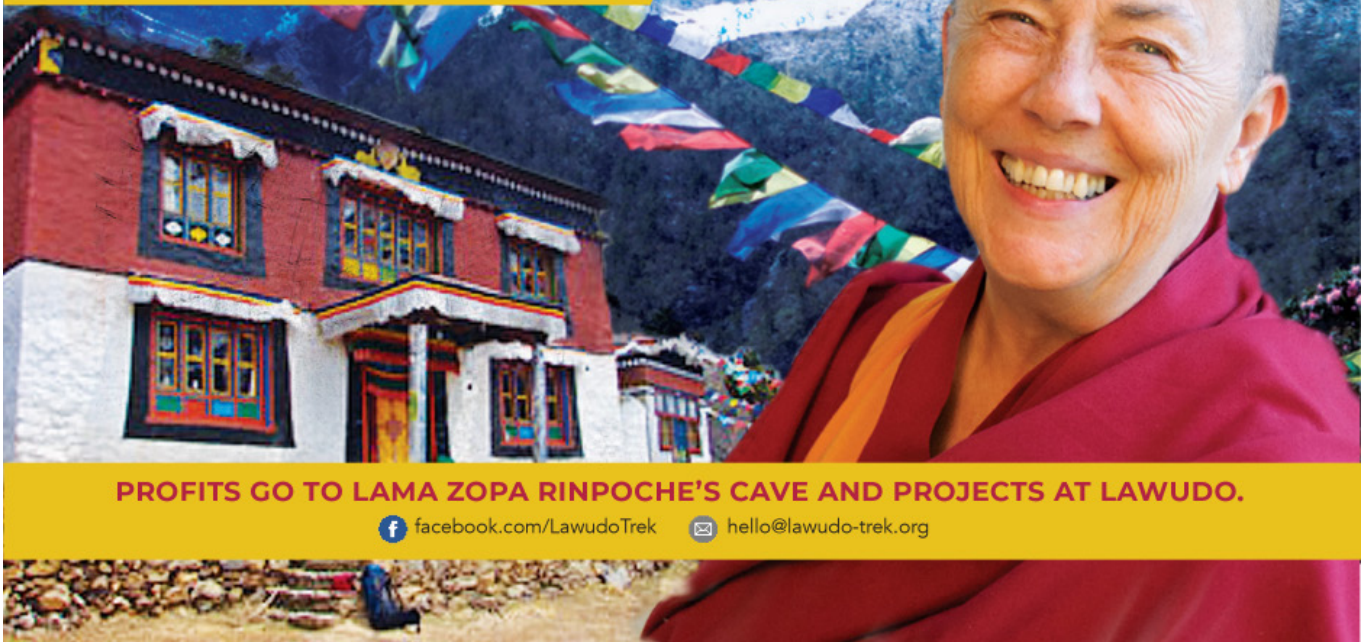
Join Ven. Robina Courtin for our third annual fifteen-day Himalayan adventure in March 2019 – from Kopan, Lama Zopa Rinpoche's monastery in the Kathmandu valley, to his cave in Solu Khumbu in the mountains of Nepal. The 2019 trek marks the 50th anniversary of the first time that Rinpoche, accompanied by Lama Yeshe, led a group of Western students to his holy cave. **The US\$2,285 package includes US\$500 donation to Lawudo, internal flights, teachings, food and accommodation.**

Our 2018 trek of 32 participants offered US\$25,500 to Lama Zopa Rinpoche's Cave and Monastery.



Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe near Lawudo, 1969. Photo George Luneau

LAWUDO-TREK.ORG



PROFITS GO TO LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE'S CAVE AND PROJECTS AT LAWUDO.

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