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Into Thin Air

A Walk Across Nepal

BY JOHN PILKINGTON

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Author's route



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‘The further one travels, the less it seems one knows.’
Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

Prologue

**Jumla, north-west Nepal
Christmas Eve, 1982**

Dear Beany,

I wonder if this letter will ever reach you? Looking across the muddy street to the post box I'm going to put it in, I can hardly believe it will. Jumla is the capital of Karnali, one of Nepal's fourteen zones, but if that sounds impressive let me add that it's the most unlikely capital city I've ever seen. Its main street has never known the wheel because the nearest road is at least 200 miles away. The mud and timber buildings have no water supply and no electricity, and most of them are plunged into darkness when the sun goes down because hardly anyone has any candles.

You probably think I'm demented to spend Christmas in a place like this. Well, let me confirm your suspicions by saying that I've struggled for three weeks over the mountains to get here. My idea was to walk from Pokhara across north-west Nepal – a desolate but most interesting part of the country where the landscape is dissected by great rivers and the people follow a subsistence way of life more or less unsullied by the outside world. So my few days in this haven of sophistication are a real treat, and I don't mind at all having to sit on the floor and eat with my fingers. Believe it or not, at the moment I'm sitting at a real table, the only one in Jumla as far as I can see. I've been drinking tea, resting my legs and watching the wrinkled old men across the street. There are a great many of these, and they're all knitting. Brows furrowed in concentration, they are taking their work very seriously and have the air of true professionals. The clatter is deafening.

It's much easier to believe in those biblical Christmas scenes when you're walking through an arid, mountainous landscape like that round here. Flocks of sheep are everywhere, the shepherds in their loincloths and blankets looking as if they're just off to appear in a nativity play. Mangers and cribs are commonplace, and the night sky is so alive with twinkling stars that a bright one in the east would hardly be noticed. Admittedly I haven't yet found an inn that can't manage to squeeze in one more guest,

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but maybe that's because I'm a foreigner.

People here are mostly Buddhists. They don't believe in Christmas, and their New Year comes in the middle of February, but if they understood what I'm writing I'm sure they would want to join me in wishing you the season's greetings. About a dozen of them are looking over my shoulder and nodding their approval.

All the best,
John

1

A Conversation Over Tea

‘When I was very young and the urge to be someplace else was upon me, I was assured by mature people that maturity would cure this itch.’

John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley*

I put down my scratchy Indian ballpoint. It rolled slowly down the length of the table and nuzzled against the packet of mouldy biscuits that the proprietor of the tea-house had proudly offered me. The biscuits were called ‘Everest’. The tea was called Brooke Bond. It was syrupy-sweet and cold.

The crowd that had gathered to watch me write had lost interest after the first half hour and had mostly drifted away to tend their sheep. Six, more resilient than the rest, remained perched on the bench opposite, still grinning, pointing and nudging one another as they had done since I arrived. Because this was Nepal, and the gathering was a social one, they were, of course, all men. Three were Tibetans, their buttery faces and maroon homespun *chubas* or cloaks immediately distinguishing them as people from the north. They had just come in from Mugu with their yaks and a cargo of wool. Another two were Hindus, recognisable by their multi-coloured *topis* or skull-caps. The rest of their dapper costume – tight, cream-coloured trousers under a dainty matching skirt – was unmistakably that of the Chhetri caste, and the sacks of red ‘Jumla’ rice at their feet identified them as farmers from one of the local villages. The sixth in the group was a shy, one-armed boy called Ram. He sat silent and motionless but fixed me with penetrating brown eyes.

The tea-house, its contents and its customers blended perfectly. Everything and everyone was blackened by years of proximity to the smoke that curled up from the juniper fire in the middle of the room, so that it was difficult to tell where one object or person finished and the next began. As my eyes became used to the dark I started to make out details. A kettle simmered on a clay oven by the fire, its steam opaque in the single shaft of sunlight that pierced down from the ‘chimney’ – a hole in the roof. An array of intricately decorated Tibetan plates and bowls

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occupied a shelf along one wall. In pride of place, between the silver-plated salver and the brass teapot, stood a jar of Nescafé. On the shelf below lay a freshly amputated buffalo head, blood still dripping from its severed gullet.

Outside in the mountain sunshine, Jumla's diminutive weekly market was doing its best to bustle. Its half-dozen stalls were the greatest hub of commerce in the whole of north-west Nepal, and people came from miles around. Here you could buy anything from magic potions to nail clippers.



Jumla distinguished itself from its lesser neighbours in another way too. It had streetlights. Four to be precise: wooden and set at various angles to the vertical, but nevertheless the municipality's pride and joy. They worked on kerosene, and when there was no kerosene, yak butter. The old men knitting round the one opposite the tea-house had been throwing me surreptitious glances when they thought I wasn't looking. Now the eldest detached himself from the group, hobbled over and sat down beside me. '*Namaste sahib!*' he grinned toothlessly, waving his knitting needle. 'We hear you have come over the mountains from Kathmandu. My friends have asked me to extend cordial greetings and welcome you to Jumla. Please, what is your name, your country, your business?'

I fumbled for words. Nepali wasn't my strong point. Name, country, age, mother's and father's names and ages and the price of my boots I had been asked dozens of times. But *business*? What business could a British town planner possibly have in this remote part of a small kingdom in the Himalaya?

The 'business' had begun a year previously when my employers – a county council in the south

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of England – had given me the opportunity to take six months’ unpaid leave to go travelling and writing. I had done some travelling already in Africa, Latin America and Alaska, but had never been east. Now I had the chance to broaden my experiences further: to visit some of the highest mountains in the world and at the same time meet people who, it was said, had found a way of life more balanced than our own.

It was natural, therefore, that my interest should focus on Nepal. The Nepalese derived their outlook from a remarkable combination of Taoist, Confucian and Buddhist influences from China and Tibet together with Hindu elements from their southerly neighbour India. With this unusual blending of beliefs they had developed a reputation for remaining calm and placid, whatever hardships might come their way.

My understanding of the religions of the East, like that of many Westerners, was limited to a few conversations and a superficial acquaintance with basic texts such as the *Ramayana* and the *I Ching*. I had learned just enough to realise that they had a great deal in common. Hindus, for example, strive to unite their *aatmaa* or innermost soul with *brahma*, the spiritual medium in which we all live and which gives us our *dharma* or duty in life. In a surprisingly similar way Buddhists seek enlightenment through following the Eightfold Path towards Nirvana. Meditation and yoga play a fundamental part in the lives of Hindus and Buddhists alike, as indeed they do for many followers of the Tao. The spiritual discipline which is almost a defining characteristic of these religions (and which is so often missing from those in the West) would, I was sure, meet its greatest challenge in the adversities confronting the peasant farmers of the highest and most rugged mountains in the world.

Atlases showed Nepal almost obliterated by that close hatching they use to indicate rough terrain. This notation was particularly evident in the north-east (around Mount Everest) and the north-west. The fact that I could find almost no other information about the north-west of the country convinced me that that was where I should go.

I toyed with the trip for ages. I sought out everything that had been written about north-west Nepal (which wasn’t much). I discussed it with anyone who would listen. Even the more detailed maps showed no roads of any kind in that part of the country, so I would have to go on foot. For much of the time I would need to be self-sufficient, especially as the weather in the mountains would be anybody’s guess; the only thing I could discover about it was that it was cold. One aspect particularly bothered me. I had come back from the Andes three years previously, laden with photographs of grand mountains and tales of exciting adventures which I had hawked round my friends in the flimsy pretence that I just wanted to share my experiences. I had burrowed away writing articles; I had even helped write a book. Actually, as everyone who has been on a long journey knows, I was simply purveying a fantasy. Robyn Davidson put it best after she had crossed the Western Australian desert with four camels.

They were gorgeous photos, no complaints there, but who was that *Vogue* model tripping romantically along roads with a bunch of camels behind her, hair lifted delicately by sylvan breezes and turned into a golden halo by the back-lighting. Who the hell was she? Never let it be said that the camera does not lie. It lies like a pig in mud. It captures the projections of whoever happens to be using it, never the truth.

If all I intended to do now was fuel the fantasy of Nepal by capturing it on film and in writing, I might as well forget it. The country was having enough trouble coping with its torrents of fantasy-seekers already, without being turned into a museum of the imagination by people like me.

But of all these conflicting intuitions the strongest had said go. No matter if what I found there was fact or fantasy; I would have to judge for myself. There could not, I thought, be many places as difficult to discover anything definite about as north-west Nepal. Maybe I could help fill the gap. With this innocent sense of purpose I posted my proposal for a book to nineteen well-known publishers. Over the next few weeks I received nineteen polite rejections.

Rotten luck? Or a rotten proposal? A friend in publishing gently persuaded me that to the people on the receiving end it must have looked a pretty rotten proposal. Possibly the thirtieth rotten proposal that day. At first I argued; after all, it had taken me a whole week to write. Eventually, however, I agreed that she was probably right. I threw away my nineteen wax images and sat down to write it properly. This time I tried some different publishers, and two months later, just when I had finally given up, I received an invitation from one to come and talk about it. It hardly seemed possible. It was cartwheels round the lawn. It was dinner with champagne. It was hope.

A week later I was sitting with the editorial director in a tiny book-lined office off Bloomsbury Square, expatiating about routes, schedules, dangers and photographic possibilities like a hardened explorer. He politely heard me out, then equally politely grilled me about some of the more obviously improvised details. After an hour he made up his mind. I had convinced him. Whatever the consequences he would support me. For the first time I allowed myself to believe the trip might actually happen. I skipped down Tottenham Court Road, grinning insanely at the shoppers, treading air.

I started making lists of things to take, arrangements to make, people to see, letters to write, jobs to do. I was amazed at how long the lists were. They covered pages. A friend suggested I should take a Sony Walkman. Another gave me a bottle of whisky to carry. Yet another presented me with a pot-pourri and an introduction to the Maharaja of Gwalior. I broached the question of unpaid leave with my employers, and we agreed that it would suit the ratepayers quite well if I disappeared for the winter, which would fit in with project work in the office. I wrote a pleading letter to the Nepalese Ministry of Home Affairs asking if they would grant me an extended visa for this period, but got no reply. Bother. I would have to try to arrange this when I arrived. Next I had to find some companies willing to sponsor me for the equipment and film I would need. More pleading letters. Medicines would be important, although I knew from past experience that I would probably end up giving most of them away. Somehow I had to find out which ones I would be most likely to need, either for myself or for the assorted ailments I would be bound to find afflicting other travellers along the way.

These practical problems and anxieties dominated my last few days in Britain. They pre-occupied me through my farewell party; they infiltrated the tearful goodbyes, the hugs and kisses and the see-you-next-years. And they were still on my mind as I stepped on to the Ariana Afghan DC-10, bound for Kabul and Delhi.

2

Approach

‘Never go abroad, it’s a dreadful place.’

Earl of Cadogan

I sat on the tarmac at Kabul airport and gave the fruit fly on my knee a closer inspection. It was an emaciated specimen – half the size of British ones, and hungry looking. I tried to swat it and missed. Half a dozen rodent faces peeked nervously from under a chapati stall nearby, sized me up as harmless, and emerged one by one followed by skinny bodies and spindly tails. They snuffled in the dirt around my feet, stopping occasionally to chomp on any scrap that looked as if it might contain a crumb of gritty food.

Kabul was plagued by vermin, dust and very young Russian soldiers toting guns. In spite of these irritations, however, the Afghans around the airport seemed genuinely cheerful. People had waved as the DC-10 taxied in among the Sukhoi fighter planes and Hind helicopters – each machine parked neatly with its armaments stacked alongside. Smiles were everywhere; a carnival atmosphere was in the air. With all this military paraphernalia set against the dusty backdrop of Kabul’s gentle surrounding hills, the scene looked like a sepia-tinted version of the Farnborough Air Show.

My glimpse of Afghanistan – taken under strict security and limited to the confines of the airport – revealed a strange mixture of sparkle and despair. It was evident from their faces that Afghans enjoyed life. All around me eyes twinkled from behind layers of shawl. But the Soviet presence was heavy and oppressive, and in this atmosphere people clearly had difficulty in getting on with day-to-day things. I made a spirited attempt to get into Kabul itself during my few hours there, if only for a cup of tea, but was told firmly that visas for such excursions were not available. ‘It ees nat verry eenteresting,’ said the Russian official in a perfect caricature of himself. Anyway, he pointed out, my plane was just about to leave.

So it did (two hours later) and as we approached Delhi I felt a tightening in my stomach. This was it – the East. The half of the world that gave us silk, spices, paper, and some radical

alternative ideas about medicine and philosophy – not to mention tigers and tea. Also, in the case of India, the part of the world where poverty reaches its ultimate, unbelievable extreme. Perhaps I was expecting all these things to slap me in the face immediately, but if so I was disappointed. My arrival was cushioned by the magnificent and unexpected hospitality of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation.

From its headquarters in New Delhi the IMF has organised several of the greatest Himalayan expeditions of recent years, and has helped and nursed hundreds more. I was lucky enough to have an introduction to the president, Harish Sarin. I phoned him from the airport. Over a crackly line Mrs Sarin told me that her husband was unfortunately out playing tennis, but I should make my way to the Foundation's hostel for mountaineers in Anand Niketan and he would meet me there. Her step-by-step directions were hopelessly lost among the crackles. I jotted down what I thought she said, stepped out of the phone booth and inquired tentatively for a taxi. I had forgotten that this was India. Within seconds a hundred taxi drivers fell upon me.

One of the throng finally enticed me into his cab by feigning convincingly that he knew where the IMF was. 'I am telling you, I have taken many fine mountaineers to this place. Yes, it is to be found just off Benito Juarez Road, quite close to here. You will see. Now, if you would be so kind as to step this way, my car awaits you. Yes, it is right here. No, there is no meter. I charge you only forty rupees because you are a visitor. Please.'

When you have just arrived in a country, new to its ways and unsure of the value of money, you've got to face the fact that somewhere along the line you're going to be fleeced. If you choose to arrive at an international airport, tired, hot and jetlagged, you can expect to be ripped off on a grand scale. Of course, I should have bargained, checked the buses, walked round the corner. Instead I sank into the tattered back seat of the cab, breathed in the aroma of stale curry which hung around it like a balloon, and dozed gratefully as we chugged around on three cylinders, looking for the phantom hostel for mountaineers. After an hour and a half we found it, and a concerned Mr Sarin told me that I should have paid no more than ten rupees for the journey. 'But let the matter rest. Welcome to India! I have reserved you a bed. Now, if you would accompany me to the dining room...' I followed him towards another aroma, this time fresh. I had arrived right on the dot of supertime.

Seated at the table were two Frenchmen, an Irish couple and a Yorkshireman: all hearty-looking types of the sort you find propping up the climbers' bars in Langdale. Their crampons were piled in a corner. 'Sit down, lad,' said the Yorkshireman. 'Get stuck in.'

The Frenchmen were glum. They had just come down from a disastrous climb in the Annapurnas which they had started as three. The third, a lad of 19, had complained of a headache at base camp. They had diagnosed pulmonary oedema, a particularly dangerous form of mountain sickness brought on by fluid in the lungs. The others had immediately evacuated him, but before they could reach a safe altitude he was dead. I knew that pulmonary oedema attacked quickly, but had never heard of anyone suffering from it so severely at only 14,000 feet. It was one of those tragic incidents that would probably never be fully explained. I sympathised as best I could with the two who would now have to go home and face the dead boy's family and friends.

The Irish couple and the Yorkshireman were on their way to an international mountaineering conference in Kathmandu. The Yorkshireman was keen – he was secretary of a well-known

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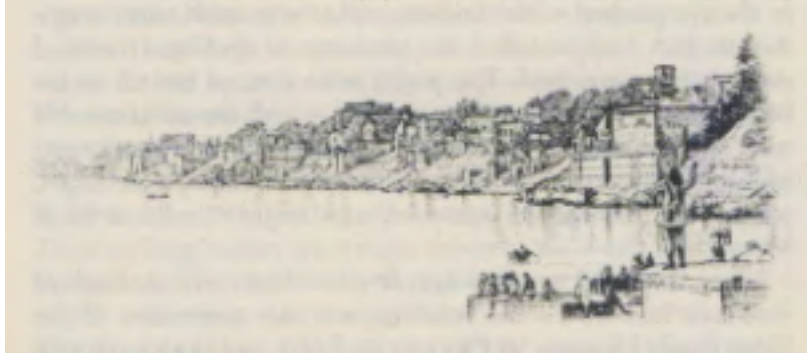
British climbing club and obviously felt he had a reputation to keep up. The Irish couple had no such reputation, and were much more casual about the whole affair, which was just as well because they had missed their flight to Kathmandu. ‘This is Robin and I’m Síle,’ said Síle. She added in a whisper, ‘We’ve really just come along for the ride.’

Next morning, as I explored Delhi with this happy-go-lucky pair, we found we had much in common. Stumbling chaotically around the city, we chanced on world-famous tourist attractions that most people know all about before they even arrive. Not for us the planned itinerary, the informed observation. ‘What the dickens is that?’ asked Síle as we found ourselves face to, face with the Red Fort, venerated for centuries as one of the greatest Moghul monuments of all time. ‘No thanks, love,’ replied Robin when, on entering the great mosque of Jama Masjid, he was insistently proffered a skirt to cover up his knobbly knees. By this method of trial and error, of *grand panache* and *faux pas*, we saw more of the city in two days than most people find in a fortnight, including many of the merchants’ quarters of old Delhi where the streets are named after the things they sell: Silversmiths’ Marg, Locksmiths’ Marg, and no doubt Transistor Radio Marg and Pocket Calculator Marg too.

Getting around the city was simple and delightful, using the rickshaws whose owners accosted us at every corner – either black and yellow motorised ones that buzzed along on two-stroke engines like giant bumble bees, or pedal ones which were really no more than outsize tricycles. Being European, we had a continuous stream of followers trying to sell us everything from postcards’ to their grandmothers. At first, I found this difficult to take in my stride. But in most Indians’ experience Westerners are rich beyond imagination and gullible beyond belief, so they could hardly be blamed for seeking a little commerce. Robin unwittingly made us see things from their point of view when we came upon two impeccably dressed Arab tourists in front of Rashtrapati Bhavan, the President’s magnificent residence, originally the Viceroy’s House. ‘Look,’ he smiled, ‘I wonder if they’ve come to buy the place?’

Of all the things the British left behind in India, I think the Viceroy’s House must have been the most impressive. It was the crowning glory of Edwin Lutyens’ architectural career: a symbol of the Empire built of massive sandstone blocks and completed only sixteen years before the British left. There were people who spent their entire working lives building it. Like so many aspects of the British Raj, the Indians have treated it with a curious affection since Independence, and have looked after it so well that now, almost forty years on, it looks better than ever.

Other unlikely reminders of the old days were everywhere. I was taken aback to find traffic driving on the left. Most of it seemed to consist of old Morris Oxfords in various states of repair, and I was glad to hear that thinly disguised versions of these were still being made by the Hindustan Motor Company in Calcutta. Road signs, car number plates and telephones were straight out of *Dr Finlay’s Casebook*. Indians adore signs, and devote all their considerable inventive skills to composing them. Almost every streetlamp boasted a slogan exhorting drivers to take more care – to no avail, as far as I could see. ‘SLOW DOWN – WE LOVE OUR CHILDREN’ was followed by ‘LIFE HAS FOUR LETTERS – SO HAS SAFE’ and the ubiquitous ‘HORN PLEASE’ (an utterly superfluous exhortation as anyone who has stood on a Delhi street will know).



As a first step towards Nepal and Kathmandu, I decided to take a train 450 miles down the Ganga – the holy River Ganges – to the city of Varanasi. This wasn't quite as easy as it sounds. India's Northern Railways have some whimsical little rules, one of which is that in Delhi tickets are bought about a mile from the station. The purpose of this is that on arriving in the pell-mell to find your train you are spared having to join the queue of people who haven't got tickets, but are hell-bent on boarding the train anyway – which I noticed most of them managed to do. 'RAILWAY SERVANTS ARE PLEDGED TO SERVE YOU', announced a sign over the platform. As the Yamuna–Ganga Express pulled into Platform Six there were no Railway Servants to be seen, but I did a quick head-count of my fellow passengers and estimated that I would be sharing the train with at least 3,000 people.

The city that now goes by the name of Varanasi was for hundreds of years called Benares, or Banares, or Banaras, and before that, Kashi. It is by general consent the oldest continually occupied settlement on earth. Time and again it appears under one guise or another in India's ancient texts. By the time of the Buddha, about 550 BC, it had become not only a thriving commercial centre but a place of pilgrimage for thousands of Hindus every year. So it was hardly surprising that the Buddha chose the deer park a few miles away at Sarnath to preach his first great sermon. Mark Twain summed up Varanasi as 'older than history; older than tradition; older even than legend. And looks twice as old as all of them put together'.

The city sits on a great bend of the Ganga, the holy water lapping the steps of the twenty *ghats* or landing stages that make up a waterfront unrivalled, at least in terms of reverence and homage, anywhere in the world. It is a jumble of towers, turrets and domes: some new, some so ancient that they seem to be crumbling back into the Ganga itself. Varanasi stone has a pinkish tinge, and when the sun rises behind the paddy-fields on the opposite bank the river momentarily turns blood red in its reflected glow. The aura is not lost on the pilgrims. Well before the first rays catch the tips of the minarets, the ghats are already thronged with figures come to pray, meditate, defecate and cleanse themselves both spiritually and bodily. By sunrise hundreds of the devout will be found in various stages of undress and immersion as the two great sustainers of life – Surya, the sun, and Ganga, the purifier – symbolically unite. At two of the ghats a different kind of ritual will be in progress: the stoking of the funeral pyres of those who have come to Varanasi to die. As many as a hundred do so every day, because to die here is to escape the vicious circle of reincarnation and pass straight to heaven. Their ashes are shovelled solemnly into the fetid water.

With the followers of two great faiths to cater for, Varanasi is always packed with visitors,

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and it was with some trepidation that I approached the problem of finding a room. I needn't have worried. The youth who enticed me on to his bicycle rickshaw knew the problem – and the solution. He took off at breakneck speed through a maze of ever narrowing streets, ran over several human toes and one bovine hoof, pressed on bravely and delivered me straight into the arms of Vijay Dixit.

Vijay Dixit, 32 years of age, five feet four, with a shock of jet-black hair and a toe missing, was the proprietor of the Shiva Guest House – 'A PEACEFUL SPOT IN HEART OF THE TOWN. WATER 24 HOURS. ROOMS FILLED WITH SMELL OF GANGES. PLEASE DONOT BELIEVE IF RICKSHA DRIVERS AND OTHER YOUNGMAN SAY THAT THE LODGE IS CLOSED.' From modest beginnings he had earned a reputation for unstinting hospitality and helpfulness, not only among Varanasi's religious visitors but with its many foreign 'pilgrims' as well. He prided himself in offering the best tourist information service in Varanasi. No problem was too great, no question too tricky, and if he didn't actually know the answer, which he often didn't, he invented one. I christened him 'Fixit Dixit'.

Fixit Dixit's guest house was indeed filled with the smell of the Ganga, and my room overlooked the great river. I watched sailing barges labour their way upstream in the last of the daylight. One by one the stars came out, and a new moon presented itself artistically left of centre. I wavered. One moment I was completely absorbed; the next I had the distracting feeling that I had blundered into the setting for a play. The Ganga rippled on regardless, barge lights twinkling, the sound of its lapping water drifting by on the evening breeze.

I'm not usually at my best in the morning, so it was with some misgivings that I asked Fixit Dixit to wake me at five. With luck, I thought, he'll probably forget. I was sound asleep when he rattled my door. I blinked at the window shutters showing the first glow of dawn. I hadn't the faintest idea where I was. Then, far away, a rhythmic drumbeat started up; a sitar joined in, and slowly, gently, I was transported back to reality. The Ganga swept darkly past the window. A chatter of voices drifted up as the first pilgrims padded down to the river. I dressed hurriedly and followed them to the main ghat, Dasashwamedh, from where the music was coming.

The sight was extraordinary. In the pre-dawn light two or three hundred people were crowded together on the steps. Their milling bodies went right down to the water's edge, and on into the river until only their heads were visible. For all I could make out they might have carried on further still. Young girls weaved in and out of the crowd, selling marigolds, rice and the crimson *tika* powder with which Hindus perform the ceremony of *pujaa*. Here at the holiest point, on this holiest of rivers this ceremonial daubing would have an added meaning, signifying not only the approval of the great god Shiva but also that of the goddess Ganga herself. A group of pilgrims pushed floating candles out into the river, and swayed gently to the music behind them as they watched their miniature lamps disappear downstream. Another pilgrim, head shaved and wearing only a loincloth, immersed himself in the water and clasped his hands together in prayer, oblivious to everything except the Ganga and the rising sun. An elderly woman scooped up her sari and waded in to do the same. Alongside her, with less ceremony, a youth soaped his armpits, while thirty yards away old men squatted in a communal latrine, ruminating in the sunrise with the same faraway gaze as the worshippers, while passers-by picked their way around them.

By 7 am the city behind the waterfront was already well into its working day. I vied with

cycles, rickshaws and spluttering scooters in alleyways designed for no more than pedestrians – and small pedestrians at that. The bells and horns conspired with the shouts of traders to burst my eardrums. I ignored a dozen urgent calls to buy this shirt, inspect that cloth, and concentrated on side-stepping the torrent of wheeled vehicles and staying alive. A cow stood broadside, completely blocking the alley while it thoughtfully nosed through a pile of rotting vegetables in a gutter. The traffic waited impatiently while the sacred animal completed its examination, emptied its bowels in the opposite gutter, and ambled on. ‘CHAI?’ shrilled a voice in my ear. I wheeled round to find myself facing a man so old and flimsy I thought at first the question must have come from somebody else. Having got my attention he wasted not a second; with one deft movement he produced a stool, a cushion and a steaming kettle. ‘Tea, sir?’ he asked.

Quite apart from its religious and historical associations, Varanasi is renowned for its silk, its brassware and (since Ravi Shankar lives there) its sitars. In the lanes I passed shops that were all but enveloped in billowing silks, cheek by jowl with emporia of dazzling copper, silver and brass ornaments, followed by establishments where craftsmen bent lovingly over strange-shaped instruments in various stages of construction. As I passed down the street, the aromas of freshly dyed fabrics gave way to the more pungent smells of resin and sawdust, and as I approached the bazaar both retreated in the face of the familiar rank odour of rotting food. Varanasi entranced me, as it has done others for over 3,000 years, and it was only by the greatest act of will that I continued on my way.



1 Approach to Kathmandu

Now anyone with the slightest sense of direction will tell you that it is easy to get from Varanasi to Kathmandu. All you have to do is go to the Nepalese border town of Raxaul, a place served by trains and buses from all points of the compass. But somehow twelve hours after leaving Varanasi I found myself 150 miles too far west. I'm still not quite sure how it happened. I was certain I should go northwards across the Ganga plain to the Indian town of Gorakhpur, then continue north and east to the border. Arriving at Gorakhpur, I escaped the mob which crowded

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round my bus by climbing on to the only other bus in sight. Everyone agreed that this was going to Nepal, so I settled down in the front seat and looked round at my fellow passengers. 'Hello,' said a Lancashire voice behind me. 'I'm Kate.'

The owner of the voice was in her early twenties: tall, auburn-haired, with a complexion that might have been suntan or possibly dust. She grinned and moved forward to sit beside me. Although I didn't recognise her our paths had apparently already crossed. She had spotted me in the bus station in Varanasi, she said, but hadn't realised I was going the same way as she was. I didn't mention that at that particular moment neither had I.

A large Nepalese woman settled down on the end of the seat with a sack of what appeared to be guinea-pigs. She smiled charmingly and dumped it on my lap. Clutching the wriggling sack, knees wedged against a throbbing engine compartment, I had a disjointed but delightful conversation with Kate as the bus edged its way north.

Kate had acquired that rare ability – the hallmark of a true traveller, I think – of enjoying her trips not just in retrospect but also at the time. This is not always easy when you have throbbing engine compartments and sacks of playful guinea-pigs to contend with – and she seemed to have contended with much worse during the six months since she had left Britain. Yet in spite of dysentery two robberies and the unsolicited attention of half the male population of Turkey she had somehow managed to retain two vital faculties, a sense of wonder and a sense of humour. Her warmth and energy told me that they had served her well. It occurred to me that considering where I myself was intending to go, I would do well to cultivate them a little too. We spent an absorbing two hours comparing catastrophes before finding ourselves, almost too quickly, at the Nepalese border post at Bhairawa.

It's curious how when you are in good company problems often seem to melt away. On my own I would have found the hundred or so boys who accosted us, each intent on persuading us to stay at his uncle's B & B, quite disarming. But with Kate's encouragement I swept them amiably aside. The immigration and customs men seemed to share our convivial mood. They chatted for a good half hour about the weather and the price of chapatis before stamping our passports with a flourish and saluting us into Nepal.

Over watery Nepalese beer we discussed our situation. Kate, a model of efficiency, was exactly on course since she was going not to Kathmandu but to Pokhara, the second city of Nepal, 150 miles to the west. I was most impressed, and asked how she did it. She laughed and dug out from the bottom of her pack a battered old school atlas and a magnifying glass. She also reminded me to alter my watch, since Nepal, in a masterly gesture of one-upmanship, keeps its clocks ten minutes ahead of those in India.

My problem resolved itself after a good night's sleep. As Kate's bus pulled out to Pokhara, another one pulled in to the muddy expanse that passed for a bus station. Nepalese buses don't actually say where they are going, but it was obvious from the chatter that this one was going to Kathmandu. With Russian, American, Canadian and British help, Nepal was building an east-west road across its part of the Ganga plain, and the bus would make use of the recently completed British section to reach the road from Raxaul. We lurched out of the bus station, the passengers babbling happily in a mixture of Hindi, Nepali and (for my benefit) some horribly contorted English. We would, they assured me, be in Kathmandu by nightfall.

After a while the labouring engine and grinding gears began to suggest that we were

beginning to climb. Aroused from my snooze, I looked hopefully in the direction where the mountains should have been, but it was a few seconds before I thought to tilt my head. Then I saw them. Forest green and ice white, they soared into a different dimension. I fell back in my seat and the other passengers laughed.

When the explorer Don Cortés was asked to describe his newly discovered Mexico to the King of Spain, he crumpled a piece of paper in his fist. ‘That is the map of Mexico,’ he said. He could equally have been talking about Asia. Not just the Himalaya, but range after range of peaks radiate from northeast Kashmir westwards across Afghanistan and eastwards across India and Tibet. The western ranges are arid and gaunt; these are the Karakoram and the mountains of Ladakh, Zaskar and the Hindu Kush. The eastern ones are snowy, with humid forested valleys. Further east still the Tibetan ranges curve south into one of the most inaccessible areas of the world. These are the mountains of the Chinese–Burmese border that give rise to the great rivers Irrawaddy and Mekong, draining Thailand and Laos and eventually disgoring into the China Sea. I was now looking up at the most rugged part of this piece of crumpled paper – the central Himalaya.

The bus wound its way through the Siwalik foothills and soon we were crossing the high plain that forms the pediment of the first big range, Mahabharat Lekh. The Nepalese were making good use of this flat land and growing rice or maize on every square foot. People were everywhere, steering ox-drawn ploughs, scything corn, or threshing the grain with great sticks in the shade of banana plants and avocado trees. I thought of the last time I had been riding across a high plateau under snow-capped peaks, in Peru. There the Quechua and Aymara Indians had gone about lethargically under a vertical sun, working just to keep themselves alive. Here, away from the tropics, people had a vigour and vitality which made you want to join in.

We dived into a gorge and the sun went out. Grey glacial water swept between vertical cliffs. I climbed on to the roof of the bus to get a better view, and noticed that above me the sky had turned grey too. Storm clouds boiled above my head, hiding the rim of the gorge so that we seemed to be driving through a huge grey tunnel. Of course. Early October. The last of the monsoon rains. Then the water hit me.

The monsoon in southern Asia is one of the few things in that part of the world which usually comes on time. On the southern slopes of the Himalaya it can be relied upon, most years, to arrive during the last week of June and to deposit regular amounts of heavy rain in the valleys and on the lower peaks until the end of September. I had hoped to arrive after these rains had petered out, so had tucked my raingear deep down at the bottom of my pack. In any case my pack was buried under mounds of trunks, sacks, spare wheels and a cast-iron mangle on the roof-rack behind me. I was soaked within seconds. The bus didn’t stop. Even if it had done I would have got just as wet inside, because it didn’t have a windscreen. The road hugged the river-bank; the bus hugged the road; I hugged the bus. A suspension bridge came briefly into view, carrying the Pokhara road. We turned east, away from Pokhara, and started to climb. It got cold and I huddled against the mangle, nibbling the sugar-cane that was sticking out of it. It was in this sorry but very appropriate state that I arrived in Kathmandu.

Kathmandu lies 4,500 feet above sea level in a broad valley which, it is said, was once a lake. The lake was called Nag Hrad, which means Lake of Serpents, and legend tells us that it was indeed full of serpents and snakes, not to mention gods such as Bipaswi Buddha, who was often

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to be seen going in and out among the lotus plants which covered its waters. A little before the beginning of recorded history the valley was visited by a great king from the north, Manjusri, who was looking for a place for his people to live. Nag Hrad fitted the bill, and Manjusri decided to drain the lake so his people could cultivate its fertile alluvial bed. He drew his sword and cut a gorge through Mahabharat Lekh to the south, and the waters swept away towards the Ganga, taking the serpents and snakes with them. The place where his sword landed is to this day called Chobar ('Sword-cut'). Manjusri's people prospered in the hospitable climate and reaped good harvests from the rich soil. They founded Manjupatan ('Manjusri's Town'), now simply called Patan.

The first clearly recorded event happened in 1614, when King Lakshmi Narsingh built a wooden guest house on the bank of Bagmati Khola (the River Bagmati) for his visitors. It became known as Kasthmandap, the Square House of Wood, and the city around it came to be called Kathmandu. The valley's three settlements of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur were at this time actually ruled as independent kingdoms, even though a person could walk from one to either of the others in less than two hours. The kingdoms had their own legal systems, art, architecture, festivals even their own coinage. They survived in this way until the Gurkhas from the west overran the valley in the eighteenth century and created what is now Nepal. But even today each city has its own customs and distinct atmosphere, though Patan has been engulfed by the ever-expanding suburbs of Kathmandu.

To anyone brought up in the 1960s, the name Kathmandu has a magical ring – like Woodstock, San Francisco or Monterey. Almost untouched by Western culture, it must have been a memorable place to reach after a long overland trip. But I think Kathmandu's heyday was probably a little earlier, in the 1950s. Its only links with the outside world then were mule trails, its only motor cars a couple belonging to King Tribhuvan. These had been carried over the mountains bit by bit by porters and pack animals. They were brought out only on state occasions, and then they had to be pushed, because there was no petrol.

Slowly things changed. The road from India came in the 1960s, and from China in the 1970s. The influx of immigrants along these roads (refugees in the case of the latter one, after China occupied Tibet in 1959) gave the Nepalese of the Kathmandu Valley a more cosmopolitan outlook. Their natural gregariousness and hospitality made them quick to accept the newcomers and their strange ways. The Tibetans soon became regarded as brothers and sisters, the few Western tourists as odd but distinguished cousins. The needs of both were accommodated without fuss.

I clambered down from the roof of the bus, retrieved my sodden pack and sloshed off to find somewhere to stay. I could have had my pick of at least fifty hotels, lodges or uncles' guest houses if I had listened to any of the boys who besieged me in the first hundred yards, but I declined them all. The streets were empty except for several inches of water. Faces grinned at me from shops and tea-houses. I crossed Durbar Square in front of the old royal palace and walked through a forest of temples, raindrops dripping by the thousand from their pagoda roofs. I wandered up Indrachowk into the heart of the old city in search of a hotel where I could rest unmolested for a few days. Even here there were few passers-by. Everybody had fled for shelter and I had the narrow winding streets to myself. I reached the Thamel district where many of the

cheaper hotels are, and finally put down my pack in the aptly named Pheasant Lodge, where pheasants scratched around among the puddles in the yard and a pink rabbit with floppy ears peered inquisitively at me from a cage.

It rained hard all night. I could hear it playing music on the tin roof of the rabbit's cage. However, when I awoke next morning I was delighted to find that the rain had stopped, the sun was high in the sky and the remains of the puddles were steaming. I dressed quickly and excitedly, then stepped out of the Pheasant Lodge and stopped in my tracks.

Where previously the street had been deserted except for some abandoned bicycles and a couple of ducks, there was now a surging mass of tourists of every nationality and creed. Levis, sunglasses, sports jackets, cameras, handbags, guide-books – even a stetson, a kaftan and a tee-shirt saying 'I'VE FLOWN OVER EVEREST'. No kidding. Wall to wall. As I gaped, flabbergasted, I noticed Nepalese boys weaving through the crowd hawking prayer-wheels, beads and other trinkets. The tourists were buying them by the dozen.

'You like?' A diminutive figure offered me a cheaply carved *khukri*, the traditional curved Nepalese knife. 'I ask only 200 rupees,' the boy said.

'Hey man,' came over my shoulder from another youth. 'You want hash? You want pretty girl? You got dollars?'

I had seen 'megatourism' in Third World countries before, but never anything quite like this. In Peru, for instance, the stoical Quechua and Aymara Indians keep the worst jet-set image-seekers at bay by the simple tactic of being aloof. The Nepalese, on the other hand, are naturally friendly and hospitable people, and born traders. They are well aware that most tourists come for the 'legend' of Kathmandu, and they nurture this legend wonderfully. The ethnic flavour is just enough to titillate the taste buds, without being so sharp that it frightens the more timid tourists away. Like all natural talents, it comes to them without their even being aware of it. Nepal now receives an incredible quarter of a million tourists each year. Many of them – by Nepalese standards – spend their dollars, pounds or Deutschmarks like confetti, and King Birendra's government would understandably like to attract still more. I took a last look at this awful, pathetic scene, dodged another boy peddling marijuana, and escaped down a side street.

My plan was to do a short 'dummy run' to test my equipment, get myself fit, and hopefully get some idea of the kinds of problems I would be likely to encounter on the walk itself. Then I would come back to Kathmandu and spend two or three weeks learning sufficient Nepali to ask directions and buy food along the way. This would also be an opportunity to arrange my visa extension, buy supplies and make any final adjustments to my gear. It was now the second week of October, so I reckoned I should be ready to start the walk in mid to late November, by which time the monsoon would be well and truly over. The only trouble with this plan was that from December onwards, there was a real chance that the high passes along the route would be blocked by snow. Some of them, once closed, would not reopen until the spring. It definitely looked as if it was going to be a race against time.

For my dummy run I chose the Annapurna Circuit. This was a 150 mile walk encircling the Annapurna massif via the Marsyangdi and Thak Khola valleys, which were linked by the 17,500 foot Thorung La pass. The circuit would be long enough to give me a foretaste of the actual walk, and the pass would acclimatise me for those I would be crossing later on. Also, the circuit

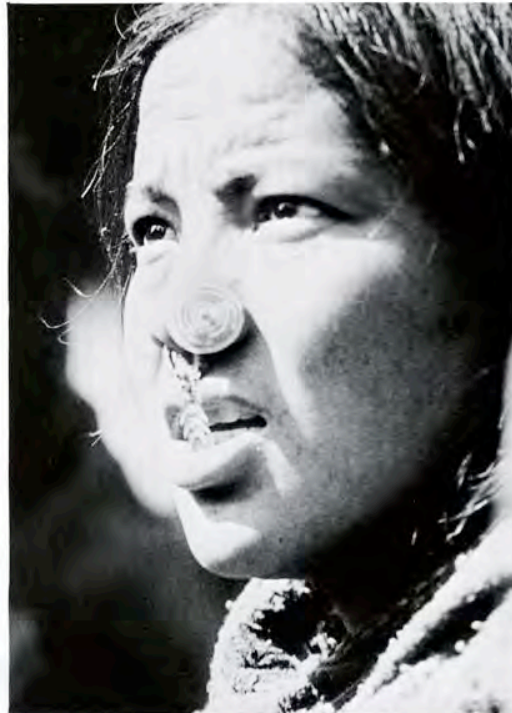
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went through some places that were very interesting in their own right. Sixty miles up the Marsyangdi Khola, it crossed an arid region behind the Annapurnas called Nyesyang where Manangba traders still enjoyed exemption from customs duties by virtue of an eighteenth-century royal proclamation. Beyond the Thorung La, it entered the once independent Mustang district where Buddhists of the Sakya-pa sect until thirty years ago paid homage and taxes to the King of Lo. It passed Muktinath, an ancient shrine where hot springs and natural gases have been venerated by Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims from all over southern Asia for at least 2,500 years. And it offered the possibility of making a detour into the so-called Annapurna Sanctuary, where I could gain some experience of living at 14,000 feet surrounded by several of the highest mountains in the world. Most important of all, at least half the Annapurna Circuit had only recently been opened to trekkers, so I hoped it wouldn't be too badly afflicted by the tourist atrocities I had just seen in Kathmandu How wrong I was to be proved to be!

Patriotic Englishmen abroad, so I had read, should at some stage during their visit present themselves at the British Embassy and pay their respects to Her Majesty's Ambassador or Consul. This seemed to me rather an impractical suggestion, and very hard on the ambassadors and consuls, but never let it be said that I am not a good patriot. That afternoon found me pressing the small brass bell-push at the Embassy gates on Lazimpath, and being told that the Vice-Consul, Mr Fulton, would see me in a few minutes. How clever, I thought, to appoint a vice-consul to handle all these patriotic people; the obvious solution.

Jim Fulton turned out to be one of the few people in Nepal who fully understood my trip. He ushered me into his office and offered me an easy chair. Blue Scottish eyes examined me from behind wire-rimmed spectacles. 'So you've come to write about north-west Nepal? I don't think any of our chaps have ever been there. It will certainly give you lots of material for your book.' He gave a little grin. 'I hope you have a successful and trouble-free trip. I say that from the bottom of my heart, because if you don't, I'm the one who will have to repatriate your body.'

Photographs 1 and 2



1 Jashara Maya of Phalenksangu – one of many villagers in the Marsyangdi Valley who, since 1977, have opened their houses to trekkers.



2 Approaching Lumsum and the Jaljala Pass. The Dhaulagiri massif blocks the valley ahead, with the summit of Churen Himal (24,150 feet) just visible left of centre.

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Photographs 3 and 4



3 The Khatyar Khola valley after the blizzard. The trail had already been re-established by villagers walking barefoot in the snow.



4 A pilgrim immerses himself on the steps of one of Varanasi's riverside *ghats*: 'oblivious to everything except the Ganga and the rising sun'.

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Photographs 5, 6 and 7



- 5 The refugee from Nam Tso in Tibet whom the author encountered at Chentung. 'The soil and climate here are OK, but I miss the fish.'
- 6 Seera's headman, Debi Lal Burathuki, relaxes with his clay *tamakhu*. Marijuana is still freely smoked in the remoter villages – an alternative to alcohol when there is insufficient surplus rice and barley to brew beer or distil spirits.
- 7 A quarter of a century after the closure of the Tibetan border, ancient trade links still survive. Here, a Tibetan porter heads towards Jumla with a consignment of wool.

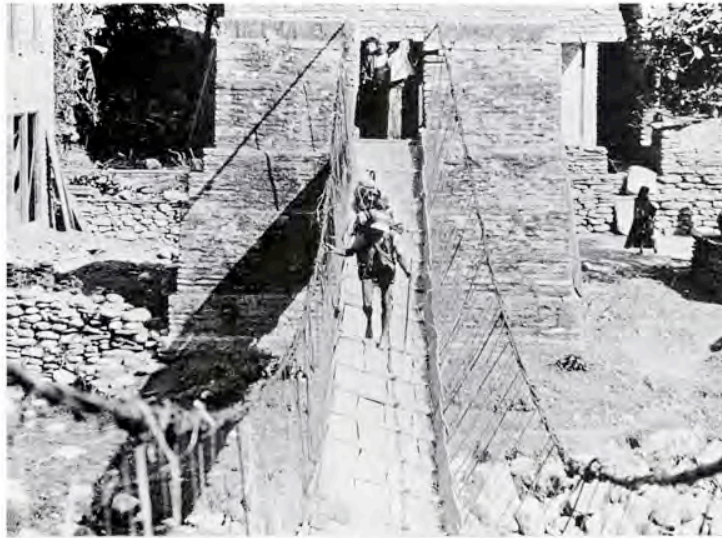
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8 An *ohar-dohar garne dungaa* ('coming-and-going canoe-boat') picks its way cautiously across the Thuli Bheri.



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Photographs 10 and 11



10 A fast food joint at Ghorepani on the Annapurna Circuit. Coke, beer, rum, and despair.



11 Jumla bazaar. In the foreground, Chhetri women carrying wicker *dokos* come in from the surrounding hills. Note the kerosene streetlights – until 1983 Jumla's only visible concession to the twentieth century.

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PHOTOGRAPHS

Photographs 12 and 13



12 Reaping the rice harvest west of Pokhara, late November. Women and children use *khukris* to cut the crop.



13 Thrashing rice on the shores of Phewa Tal. The animals' trampling separates the grains.

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Photographs 14 and 15



14 The main street of Seera, a Bhotia village on the Uttar Ganga. Log steps lead to the street above.



15 Travelling musicians near Darbang. The brass section could be heard three miles away.

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Photographs 16 and 17



16 The National Kabbadi Championships at Mahendranagar.



17 Porters, goat-herders and the author share a smoke before tackling the climb to Chakhure Lekh.

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END OF SAMPLE MATERIAL