

Chapter 9

Nepal 1996



Wednesday, May 29 – Kathmandu

This is my first trip to a new country entirely for myself. That is, I don't have any meetings or other professional obligations here. I had to make my fourth trip to Delhi for a meeting earlier this week, and I decided to take a side trip to Kathmandu in Nepal. I flew here yesterday on the Royal Nepal Airline, and I will return to Delhi Saturday afternoon and fly home Sunday.

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I booked this side trip from home, asking my travel agent to arrange both the flight and the hotel. As a result, I am in a five-star hotel, the Yak and Yeti, which is perhaps the best hotel in the country. It costs a lot, but I admit that the comfort of it was a welcome change after the usual Spartan lodging of the India International Center in Delhi.



Yak and Yeti Hotel, from Web 2023

Indeed, I don't know whether it is me or the surroundings, but the first thing I did on arrival was fall asleep on the king-size bed. I was awakened when my driver from the airport phoned to suggest taking me to the airline office to reconfirm my return flight. I was surprised that should be necessary – that it couldn't be done by phone – but he assured me that it was. I didn't want to do it then, however, and shook him off. I spent the rest of the afternoon reading the guidebook to Nepal that I'd brought along and deciding on things I wanted to do. After a (large) dinner in a restaurant in the hotel (with a Russian theme – I had borscht and chicken stroganoff), I fell asleep and slept until after 11:00 this morning.

A word about my flight from Delhi. It was uneventful, in a decent-sized plane, fortunately. I had a window seat, and I glanced down occasionally looking for mountains. All I saw was a stark brown countryside. It was broken up by roads, paths, and houses, but while it was clearly farmland, there was no sign of anything green at all. It is late May, just before the monsoon that starts in mid-June, and I'm guessing that the fields are dry and between growing seasons, just waiting for moisture.

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As we approached Kathmandu, it did get somewhat greener, but as far as I could tell it was still flat. I'd seen no sign of mountains, even though Kathmandu is supposed to be in a valley surrounded by the Himalayas. Then suddenly I saw two apparently adjacent fields move with respect to each other, and I realized we were flying low over terraced hills. For the rest of the approach to Kathmandu, I enjoyed watching the changing perspectives on these hills as we flew by. Almost every bit of land was terraced for farming, except for the very steepest slopes.

While waiting in the Delhi airport for this flight, I was caught up in watching my fellow travelers. I first noticed the many men of all ages – Muslims, I think – who were wearing loose-fitting pajama-like suits. I first noticed them when a large old man, part of a group of men dressed like this, sat down in the seat next to me. There were plenty of other empty seats nearby, but this old man tried to sit in the one next to mine. I say “tried,” because once he'd turned his back to the seats, he paid little attention as he sat, and he sat on my leg. This didn't seem to faze him, and fortunately he slid off onto the next seat, or I would have been in an awkward situation.

Perhaps because he had interrupted my reading, I started looking around the terminal at all the other people, many of whom were dressed as he was. These pajama-like outfits have pants and shirt of the same loose fabric, probably cotton, and of a light, plain color – white or some sort of off-white. The shirt is worn outside the pants, and it extends down to about the knees. Many of the men also wore a shorter vest over this, of a different color and sometimes with a pattern. As I watched a number of these men standing around talking to one another, I noticed that they frequently had to grasp their pants and hold them up a bit, apparently because they were baggy and got in the way when they walked. They did this by grabbing a wad of cloth, both shirt and pants I guess, just about at their crotch. It was an interesting effect. Like little boys needing to go to the bathroom.

After marveling at the strangeness of these and many other types that I saw around me, I finally realized that there were lots of them, and only one of me. I was standing in a line waiting to go through security when I noticed first that I was the only man in the airport wearing a sport jacket, or any kind of coat. All others were either dressed in these pajamas or were wearing uniforms or simple slacks and shirts. This was not unreasonable, given the temperatures outside of close to 110. I'd only brought the sport coat in the mistaken belief that I would need it for our meeting in India. Anyhow, not only was I the only person dressed this way, I was also taller than anyone else. And while I had far from the only beard (the pajama men almost all had beards) mine was one of the few that was trimmed, and the only one that was (still at least partly) brown, rather than black, grey, or white.

Speaking of how people dress, there was one thing I learned this time in Delhi that is worth mentioning. It was very hot, of course, ranging from 104 at night to 110 during the day. Yet I noticed that many of the people, such as taxi and rickshaw drivers and others, were wearing long-sleeved shirts. I asked my friend Rajesh Chadha about that, and he explained that they

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probably couldn't afford to own both short- and long-sleeved shirts, and it is cool enough in the winter to need long sleeves. That put their poverty into a different perspective.

On the flight, the attendants passed out customs forms very similar to what one gets on flights into the U.S. Like the U.S., Nepal is apparently very particular about what they will allow into the country. Unlike our forms, however, these were explicit in listing what we could and could not bring in. Most of these concerned limits on things like tobacco, alcohol, drugs, and money, but I was intrigued by a part of the list enough to write it down: We could bring in without declaring used linen, one camera, 15 rolls of film, one tricycle, one perambulator, and a few other things. I had my linen, certainly used, and my camera and film. But I wish I had known I could bring in a tricycle.

Today, much later than I'd intended, I set out on foot to explore Kathmandu. From the guidebook I'd planned a route that would take me past the Royal Nepal Airline office. I found it without trouble and reconfirmed my flight. As I was standing in line there, waiting for one of the two agents who were handling reconfirmations to become free, several people cut ahead of me, but one agent caught my eye and insisted on helping me first when she was free, even though she had to do it over the heads of the others. Perhaps there is an advantage to standing out in a crowd.

I then walked through the narrow, crowded streets of Kathmandu to the central square, where all the temples are. The temples are marvelous, but they are rather close together, and like everything else here they are dirty, in disrepair, and many are crowded with people doing one thing or another – sometimes sleeping, sometimes selling things, and sometimes, I suppose, worshipping. Both the temples, as well as other ordinary buildings if they are at all old, are decorated in places with intricately carved wood. But even these bits are not really pretty, because of their surroundings and their state of disrepair. Amongst all this filth and squalor, however, almost every woman you see, of any age, is wearing a beautiful brightly colored and patterned sari. It is quite a contrast.

From the central square I headed down a narrow lane that was apparently too narrow for cars, figuring from its slope that it must be heading for the river. Soon I was on a bridge over the river, looking down at its almost dry riverbed (remember, it is just before the monsoon) and at the community of broken-down brown brick huts that line the bank.

As I arrived on the bridge, I noticed a naked little boy, perhaps one or two years old, wandering aimlessly with nobody paying him any attention. He wandered part way along next to me, but then when I looked back from the middle of the bridge, I saw him standing by a group of three

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young women who were squatting on the pavement doing some sort of business. It wasn't obvious that they noticed him or cared about him, however. I took a picture of the group from a distance, noticing that the boy had brown hair and a fair complexion, both of which are unusual here. I also thought I saw him again later, when I returned along another street nearby. This time he was next to a man, apparently a derelict, who was too much of a mess for me to tell much about him. I am reminded, though, that Kathmandu was a Mecca for hippies back in the 60s or 70s, and they say a few of them are still around.



Kathmandu, from trip

After I crossed the bridge, I followed a narrow path next to the river for a ways. The buildings were only slightly better than what I had seen from the bridge in the other direction. But I thought I detected better construction just beyond them, away from the river, and I thought that maybe I was passing along the backside of a more decent neighborhood. Eventually, when I came to a lane leading away from the river, I took it. But conditions didn't improve, and I never did find anything better on that side of the river. Everything I saw was just incredibly poor and filthy, and it was hard to imagine how these people survived. A few children, neatly dressed in school uniforms, gaily said hello to me, but otherwise nobody bothered me asking for money. That only came later when I was in a neighborhood more regularly frequented by tourists.

I went back and recrossed the bridge, then worked my way zigzagging north between the square with all the temples and the river. For a ways it was still squalid, especially near the river, but eventually I got back into crowded commercial streets and headed for a section called Thamel that the guidebook said had lots of hotels and restaurants for the "shoestring traveler." I found

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one of these restaurants and spent a few dollars on spinach soup, a vegetable burger, and a couple of Pepsi's. Kathmandu is known for its restaurants, but not for its local cuisine. Instead, the restaurants attempt just about every other cuisine in the world, including American, catering to the "trekkers" who get here by hiking the Himalayas.

I should have mentioned that it was pretty hot. It was not nearly as bad as Delhi, but it was probably in the upper 80's, and when the sun was on you it was uncomfortable. It was not uncommon to see both women and men using umbrellas for protection from the sun. After walking for perhaps three hours, including my stop for lunch, I was glad to circle back to my air-conditioned hotel.

During my walk I saw many people at work. The most frequent sight was of people carrying things, most often on their backs, but occasionally on their heads. And most who carried loads on their backs had straps from the loads that went over their heads, so that they were really carrying with their heads, too. There were many women with baskets on their backs; the baskets were roughly cone-shaped, open at the top. And there were many men carrying what looked like much heavier loads that were just tied up in some way, sometimes big bags of material that could have been grain, cement, whatever. The men especially looked utterly miserable to me, though I may have been projecting. They were hunched over at the waist as they walked, usually gripping the straps on each side of their head with both hands. And they were usually dressed in rags, some with thongs on their feet, many others barefoot.

There were also other kinds of work going on that looked more pleasant. One man was sitting on the ground with a sewing machine, making something. There was no sign of electricity for him, and I think he was turning the wheel with his hand. There were many others along one street selling all sort of things. Curiously, many of them had bathroom scales on the ground in front of them, presumably to weigh their wares, although none of them was selling anything big, and I'd have thought a bathroom scale would not be accurate enough for anything small.

And of course, there were many people with vehicles of one sort or another, carrying cargo or people. Bicycle rickshaws are more common here than in India, and I didn't see any of the motorized rickshaws. There was also, for cargo, a vehicle that I've never seen before. (Every country seems to have some sort of vehicle that is new to me.) I'll call it a handlebar truck. The



Kathmandu, from trip

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Man at work, from trip



Woman at work, from trip



Women at work, from trip

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back part is just a decent sized wagon, with only two wheels – a trailer, really. But the front part also has only two wheels, with a good-sized car engine mounted on top of them with headlights in front and two long handlebars extending out the back. The front and back parts are hitched together, like a trailer, so that both can turn, and the driver sits on a seat at the front of the wagon part, reaching forward for the handlebars with which he steers and controls the vehicle. It is a very basic mode of conveyance, and very common here. And it gave me the same impression that I sometimes get of a wasp or ant, with a waist so small that you wonder how it holds together. Because they could bend at the waist, these handlebar trucks did look like insects as they bent to go around corners and up hills.

As in much of India, the bottom floors of most of the buildings, in the parts of the city that I was in at least, are used for some sort of work or business. The streets therefore are lined with rooms in these buildings that open out onto the street. Except in the nicest part of the city (near the hotel), the fronts of these rooms are completely open during the day – no walls, windows, or doors, just open. At night they are closed up by doors, either several regular wooden doors like we would have in houses, or metal doors that roll down from above like a garage door to cover the whole space. In fact, these rooms are almost all about the size of a one-car garage, some serving as shops to sell things, some as workshops to make things (several had men pedaling sewing machines to do embroidery, for example), and some that had no obvious purpose at all.

Another thing I noticed on my walk was the apparent importance of community water supplies. Every few blocks I would come across a sunken area, maybe six feet down and fifteen or twenty feet square, the sides and bottom bricked, and one wall with some sort of spout. In some of these, people were using the water to wash, and I gather that this was their only source of water. Also, in many places around the city were huge black water tanks, round cylinders with peaked tops, made of metal. They were always labelled with what was apparently the name of the company that made them, Hilltake. These tanks too had spouts near the bottoms, and I'd see people filling jugs and buckets from them. I don't know who provides these tanks, though I suppose it must be done by the government. And I also wondered how anyone can deliver the tanks to their locations. It seemed like it would take a crane to lift one if it was full of water, and I never saw anything like that.



Water tank, from Web 2023

I have referred several times to how dirty everything is here (not the hotel, but almost everything outside it). But I should also mention that I have seen lots of people actively engaged in cleaning things, usually the sidewalks and streets. I saw many women using bundles of sticks that served as short-handled brooms to brush the debris from place to place. In most cases I couldn't see where they were brushing it to, but one woman did have a basket on a rope that she dragged along behind her, and I could see that it had a small accumulation of the dirt and debris that she

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was sweeping. These women, by the way, were just like the others in that they were wearing colored saris, though it must have been hard to keep them clean as their job, together with the short handle of the broom, required them to be dragging it through the dirt most of the time. I wondered, as I watched these women, who was paying them to do this, and whether they were really making a difference. There are piles of dirt and garbage everywhere, but perhaps the fact that it is in piles, rather than spread even more evenly through the city, is due to these women.

I also wondered how it is that developed countries manage to seem so clean. You seldom see anyone in the U.S. sweeping the sidewalks or streets, yet both are immaculate compared to India and especially Nepal. I know that we have street sweeping machines in Ann Arbor, but they make enough racket that I think I know how often they appear, and it can't be more than a couple times a year. It helps, I'm sure, that humanity doesn't live quite so close together in Ann Arbor as in Kathmandu, so that our litter is more spread out. But New York must be as concentrated as here; does a city here spend a huge amount keeping itself clean?

I stopped at one point to watch some men engaged in constructing a building. From where I was watching, I could see only a grid of cement walls that may have been a foundation or may have been the bottom story of a building that opened onto the side of a hill where I couldn't see it. The workers' task as I watched was to bring baskets of some material – I couldn't tell if it was dirt, gravel, or perhaps dry cement – and dump it into the square nearest to me, made by these cement walls. They had several wooden planks placed across the corners of some of the other squares in the grid for them to walk on. As I watched, one man would climb up a ladder to the far corner of this structure, carrying one of these baskets suspended from a strap over his head. Then he would walk carefully along the walls and planks toward my corner, where he turned his back and somehow released the basket, which tilted and dumped its contents into the square. Then he would return over a slightly different route along the walls and planks, while another worker repeated the process behind him. What struck me most was how slowly these men moved. It was like I was watching a dance in slow motion.

Friday, May 31

Thursday morning, I got up early, had coffee, and was out on the streets by 7:00. I was hoping to catch the morning sun and also to beat the heat. I was out before the shops were open, but there were plenty of people in spite of that. Right off, I saw a couple of women sweeping, like I said before, but this time I saw that they had long-handled brooms. I also noticed that their saris were identical, gray with some colored stripes near the bottom. They also wore shawls of different, brighter colors, but I guessed that the saris were a kind of uniform and that they worked for the city. From then on, I saw many more women sweeping, many dressed the same way. There also were occasional women working on their knees with short brooms like I saw before, but I think they may have been tending their own places.

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I planned to head across the river over to a place called Swayambhunath Stupa – also called the monkey temple. The guidebook gave directions from the central square, called Durbar Square, where I'd seen so many temples the day before, so I headed there first. By the time I got there, probably 7:30, traffic was as heavy as mid-day. But the square itself was off limits to cars and trucks, so it was a pleasant place to be, especially with the sun coming in at a low angle. I stayed for quite a while, wandering from place to place, taking pictures.



Durbar Square, from Wikipedia 2023

I watched for a long time at some sort of small shrine, noticing that passersby would reach into it with one hand and touch something, then usually touch their foreheads with the same hand. I was pretty sure that they left a red mark when they did that, but so many had red marks on their foreheads already that it was hard to be sure. They didn't make a big thing out of this, or go out of their way, but it seemed that if they happened to be passing within reach, it was something to do. Once two little boys came along and started playing at the shrine. Nobody seemed to object, but nobody touched it while the boys were there.

Eventually I moved on and found the narrow lane down to the river that the guidebook said to take. This, it said, was christened Pig Alley or Pie Alley back in the hippie days, but I wouldn't have known that without the book. There didn't seem to be anything special about it.

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Maru Tole, once dubbed “Pig Alley”, in central Kathmandu, from Web 2023

As expected, Pig Alley led down to the river where there was a footbridge to cross it. As not expected, the footbridge was closed, two boards making an H across its entrance and most of the surface of the blue metal bridge missing. I supposed I would have to walk along the river to the next bridge, but then noticed that people were crossing here anyway. Because the rains haven't started, the river is just a trickle out in the middle of the riverbed, and someone has put down a few planks across it. There was a steady flow of foot traffic and bicycles making a path through the mud and across these planks. I went with the flow, past a small herd of indifferent cows, and made it across.

On the other side the city resumed, and I followed streets up a gradual incline until I reached the base of the hill with the monkey temple. Stupa seems to mean steps, I think, and a helpful boy (who wanted to sell me something) said there were 365 of them. An easy number to remember; I don't know if it was right, but it might have been. It was a lot of steps.

Part way up were the monkeys, the reason for the name. A large group of grey-brown monkeys live here and survive quite nicely on handouts. I was glad of an excuse to stop climbing stairs, and I enjoyed watching them. They were very cute and tame, until one of them apparently was offended by another. Suddenly they all raised a racket of chattering and began chasing each other back and forth and up and down the stairs. The commotion stopped as quickly as it had

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started, though, and life went on. One monkey, by the way, had a baby clinging to her chest through all of this. I never saw the baby really, just its hands. She seemed to pay no attention to it at all as she moved about grabbing food for herself.



Eastern Staircase from Wikipedia 2023



Temple monkeys from Wikipedia 2023

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As I continued my climb, the hill got steeper and steeper, the stone steps often tilting unhelpfully down. Fortunately, there was a continuous double metal railing going up the middle, and I could hold onto that. Otherwise I don't think I could have made it – the height thing would have gotten to me. As it was, when I had to lift a hand off the railing to get a grip further up, I had to grab it first with the other hand. Not elegant, but I am rapidly learning not to worry about what I look like.

Unfortunately, part way up I noticed that I was on the right-hand side of the railing. The guidebook had warned that one must always circle temples clockwise, or you'll give offense, and I realize that might be easier from the left side of the railing once I got to the top. More to the point, I was the only person going up on the right, and all the people coming down were having to walk around me (since I wouldn't let go of the railing). So I ducked under.



Swayambhunath stupa, from Wikipedia 2023

The temple, when I reached it, was not that great. Neither was the view, because of the season. I didn't stay very long. The most interesting thing was a man who appeared on top of the temple's white dome, carrying a cup of some yellow liquid – paint, perhaps – that he carefully poured out onto the dome in an arc. He did this repeatedly, all the way around the dome, creating a yellow scalloped streak. I've since seen pictures of this dome with this same decoration, but also other pictures without it. Perhaps if I'd been willing to hire one of the many people who offered to be my guide, I could now explain this.

Twice on the visit to this temple I saw little boys playing with sticks and small hoops. The hoops were only about six inches in diameter, but that was enough for them to roll nicely. The first boy was on the steps at the bottom of the hill, where the steps were still very wide. At each step he would start his hoop rolling with his hand, then try to keep it rolling with his stick. The stick had a thick little metal wire sticking sideways out the end, and he would push the hoop along with that wire until he reached the back of the step. Then he'd pick up the hoop and start again on the next step up. At the top of the hill, I saw another even littler boy trying to do the same thing in the courtyard around the temple. But he didn't have the knack. He could start the hoop rolling

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alright, but when he then tried to nudge it along with his stick, he'd knock it over. After each couple of tries he would stop and try to bend the wire on his stick into a different shape, but he didn't seem to know what he was doing. Still, the game kept him interested longer than I was willing to watch, and I eventually moved on.

Back down from the temple, I noticed that my thighs and calves had awakened to some new sensations from the climb. I was therefore glad to stop for coffee at an open-air cafe when I found one. There were just two tables. I sat at one and listened to a group that was at the other. The men looked western and one of them was apologizing loudly to a pretty but unhappy woman in a sari, perhaps an Indian or a Nepali. In English but with a German accent he kept telling her that it was not his fault, that he was upset too, that it was the others who were being slow. Then he would call out in German to the house behind the cafe, apparently a hotel, to his friends to come on, they were late. I was pleased that I understood every word of his German.

After I'd crossed the river, by a regular bridge this time, I thought I was making my way back to the hotel. I checked my map every now and then, but a map isn't all that helpful when few of the streets are named on the map, and none of them are marked. (Actually, I've seen a couple of street signs that doubled as ads for Coke, but they were for streets that I already knew.) After walking what seemed a long way along one of them, I came to the Garden Hotel (fortunately they seem to name many things in English, at least things for tourists). I looked it up on my map and found that it was the last thing marked on the road heading north out of town. If I hadn't noticed it, I'm not sure where I'd be right now. I turned around and headed back to my hotel successfully, but exhausted.

I had wanted to get out of the city at some point, so I'd earlier asked the travel desk in the hotel for suggestions. They recommended a trip by car to Nagarkot, a place in the mountains about an hour away, and with a beautiful view. They suggested going in the late afternoon, to see the sunset. The trip would cost me \$65. That seemed a lot, and I was doubtful that I'd see a sunset anyway, since we'd had thunderstorms the last two evenings at that time. But it sounded worth doing anyway, if only to get out of the city. So later on Thursday, I stopped into a couple of travel agencies that I'd seen near the hotel and asked about such a trip. The first place didn't know what to do with me, since they normally arrange treks of at least five days. But the second was much more helpful.

This was Wonderland Travel (exotic, no?). One man started looking up prices and asked his Sherpa for advice on what I should do. (Sherpas are one of the ethnic groups native to the mountains of Nepal. They are used as guides by trekkers and mountain climbers. When famous mountain climbers get into trouble climbing Everest, it is Sherpas – names seldom mentioned – who try to get them out.) The Sherpa in this case was a leathery looking fellow who didn't smile much. Together they agreed that they could drive me to Nagarkot in the morning, then pick me up a few hours later at any of several places that they recommended I trek to. After looking at all these other places on the map, I asked if they could just pick me up back in Nagarkot – I'd go out as far as I felt like and come back. That was fine, and we agreed on a price of \$24, which I paid in advance. They asked when to pick me up, and, wanting an early start, I suggested 8:00. The

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Sherpa said no, though, apparently because of some reason involving the sun. Since Nagarkot is east of here, I thought maybe he didn't want the sun in the driver's eyes. I suggested maybe the afternoon, then, though I worried about rain. Finally they suggested 6:00 AM, and I agreed. Go figure.

Back in my hotel, the phone rang, and I snapped it up, thinking it might be Pat. No, it was my man from Wonderland Travel (not the Sherpa, the other one) calling to say I should bring an umbrella. Does he tell all the trekkers that? And also, some sort of bag to carry my water (which I should also bring). And chocolate, for energy. I'm surprised he didn't ask if I had good shoes. I thanked him and said I'd do my best.

I borrowed an umbrella from the hotel (purple, pink, blue, and green), and I bought a strange little expandable cloth bag in a shop. The water I already had (I order a bottle at every meal over here). I thought I'd skip the chocolate, though I guess I could have taken some from the minibar.

This morning at 5:00 I was up and getting ready. Since I almost always forget something and have to return to my room, this time I took great care in preparing. I had my umbrella, my camera and lots of film, and my new bag with a bottle of water, the guide book, and a map that the Sherpa had sold me. I slathered on sun block and was ready to meet the elements.

My driver showed up early, together with a friend who wanted to ride to Nagarkot if I didn't mind, which I didn't. They were both young men with only a little English, and they engaged in nonstop conversation with each other for the entire trip. My driver seemed adept with steering wheel and horn, as he weaved in and out, first in the traffic and then around the bends on the mountain road.

The first half of the trip was through city, first Kathmandu and then another place nearby called Bhaktapur. I found myself thinking how nervous Pat would be on a drive like this. Close calls with oncoming traffic of all sorts are just normal procedure here, just as in India. But for some reason this doesn't bother me even though she's right about the danger. I just sit back and take it all in. It's not like heights, which I fear even though they are harmless; I actually thought this to myself, somehow forgetting where we were going.

Sure enough, the second half of the trip was up the side of a mountain, where I would have crept along if I'd been driving. My driver didn't. But he did slow down for the blind curves and used his horn. One time we pulled over to let a bus from the other direction pass. It got halfway past us and stopped for lack of room. For ten minutes or so, both the bus and the car tried to adjust their positions, the drivers talking back and forth. The bus finally squeezed past without damage to anything or anybody. This wasn't as bad as it may sound, from my viewpoint, since we were on the uphill side of the road.

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Through most of the ride up the mountain, every bit of land I saw was terraced for farming. This was true even when it was so steep that the terraces could only be a foot or two wide. Somebody sometime put a tremendous amount of effort into preparing this land for farming and keeping it that way, even though it is hard to see how they could grow much in that space. I also noticed that a great many of the larger plots of land were freshly plowed. This didn't mean much to me until I saw how it was done. No tractor, not even an animal, was used to pull a plow. Instead, it was done by one man using a tool that looked like a large drapery hanger – a wide hook on the side of a bar. Holding both ends of the bar, the man would swing the hook down into the ground between his legs. Then he would pull it backwards through the ground, the hook turning over the soil. I don't know if all the plowed land was done this way, but I never saw any other, and once I noticed it for the first time, I saw many doing it this way.

At the top of the mountain, we stopped at a small restaurant that was perched on the very peak. This wasn't a very tall mountain, but it was high enough to give an incredible view in all directions. The restaurant had windows on all four sides to take advantage of it. But it was too cloudy to see much.

I had breakfast "the Nepali way," meaning a bowl of potatoes and vegetables in a sauce together with two round puffy flat breads that were freshly made and smelled like pancakes. And coffee, of course, though the milk in it was curdled. Two other tables were filled with tourists when I got there, but they were Indians, I think, so to me they felt like locals.

After breakfast I set out on my trek, my bag with its water bottle over one shoulder and my multi-colored umbrella in my hand. Nagarkot was just two small clusters of buildings along the road on either side of the restaurant. I set off down the road in the unpaved direction and soon was out of the village, following the road along a ridge that led to another few buildings. These turned out to be small hotels, and I continued this way for a while, taking pictures and enjoying the sights.

As I left the village, I met a dog who came over to check me out. Then he followed along as I walked, sometimes getting out ahead of me and sometimes venturing off to one side or the other. This meant that he sometimes got into my pictures, and I'm looking forward to seeing how many he appears in. Except for him, I can't really say much about what I saw, but it was fun at the time.

I did see a woman carrying a huge pile of clothes. She passed me on the road, then turned off it and climbed down the hillside to a place I could see where there was apparently a well, or some sort of arrangement for delivering water. When she got there, she dumped all the clothes on the ground and spread them out. I gather that she was doing her laundry.

There were many others I passed on the road as well. One was a man with a little boy carrying a package. The man carried nothing, except when he held the package while the boy peed. When I passed him he looked up at me and said "Kathmandu?" I nodded, and he said "Cigarette?" I'm afraid I was a disappointment to him.

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At another place, I passed a man behind his house who was using some sort of electric power tool to plane down logs into roughly square beams. He had finished one and was working on another. I saw him on my way out from the village, and again on my way back. Both times, two other men were sitting on a wall nearby keeping him company as he worked.

Once I glanced down the slope next to the road and saw a man carrying two live chickens upside down out into a small clearing. An upside-down basket was already there on the ground, and he first managed to put one of the chickens under it, without letting go of the other. Then he took out a knife, and with his back to me blocking my view, apparently slit the throat of the chicken that he still held. I saw the blood flowing out onto the grass. Immediately he stuck most of the chicken into a large saucepan that was also already there on the ground, apparently filled with hot water. Then he very efficiently plucked the feathers out of the chicken, and had it pretty well cleaned within a minute. As he then reached under the basket for the other chicken, he glanced up and saw me. He gave me a big grin, then repeated the process with the unfortunate second chicken.

Throughout this walk, I felt a little silly carrying my umbrella, but then it started to sprinkle. Not opening it would have been even sillier, so I did. I felt like the only person on the mountain with an umbrella. Fortunately, the sprinkle turned into a real rain for a while, and I felt a bit more appropriate.

[Years later, I find that I do have a few of the photos that I took on this trip, and several look like they were from this trek. But none capture any of the sights that I just spoke about. I'm putting them here below, to give some sense of what I saw.]

My driver and his friend were waiting when I got back, and they whisked me back down the mountain. That wasn't bad, but the last half of the drive through the city seemed to take forever, much of it behind smoke-belching trucks and busses. My driver was sensitive to this problem, passing whenever he could and even laying back 50 yards once when it was clear he wouldn't be able to pass one of the worst offenders. But even so, by the time I got back to the hotel I only wanted to pass out. I more or less did.

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Nepal, from trip



Nepal, from trip



Nepal, from trip

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Saturday, June 1

I'm at the airport in Kathmandu now, waiting for my flight back to Delhi and then my return home. I'm ready. But I did enjoy my visit here, even though I didn't find much beauty.

On Friday, after a rest, I set out to shop. That is never my favorite thing to do, especially in places where I expect to be hounded and taken advantage of. You'd be amazed at how many vicious-looking knives, for example, I already hadn't bought. The routine of most of the hawkers was to start with "Excuse me, sir," and then go on with "Would you like" this or that. I got into the habit of shaking my head when they said, "Excuse me, sir." This afternoon I was still carrying the umbrella I had borrowed from the hotel, since in my experience it was likely to rain in the late afternoon here, even though right now it was sunny. At one point I passed a man who said, "Excuse me, sir." As I started to shake my head, he went on with, "Why are you carrying an umbrella?"

Later, as I passed a shop, a man inside called out, "Excuse me, sir, would you like a haircut?" Sometimes, clearly, they did pay attention to what you needed. Several boys offered to shine my shoes. Part of the appeal of the old docksiders that I wear is that I have never shined them. But



Thamil, from Wikipedia 2023

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now they are wearing out, and one of the boys pointed out a hole in the leather by my little toe and offered to repair it. I declined.

My guidebook had suggested a place called the Craft Collection, in the Thamil district not far from the hotel. I headed there as directly as I could manage, more or less surrounding it until I had it cornered. Thamil is the liveliest spot for low budget tourists, and I knew I was close when the hawkers shifted from knives and jewelry to hashish. The Craft Collection was a small store (small by our standards, large by Nepal's) with cases and shelves of Nepali-made items, everything marked. And nobody approached me when I walked in. When I started picking things off the shelves, someone brought me a small plastic basket to put them in. But otherwise, they left me alone except when I asked questions. And I found a surprising number of things that I decided I wanted. It was wonderful.

Working my way back to the hotel, I found myself at an intersection of narrow lanes where the traffic had to split, so I stationed myself at the fork, set to take pictures of the incoming flow. The lanes were too narrow for cars, really, so it was mostly foot traffic. Everyone coming one direction had to walk straight towards me before turning right or left, so I was ideally placed to shoot them, as I did my best to seem to be looking over their heads. Of course, some of the best ones I missed until it was too late, but I still hope I may have captured a few interesting types.

I was tired, so I hired a bicycle rickshaw to take me back to the hotel. I figured he could negotiate crossing the intersections better than I could. I was wrong. At one major traffic circle, he started to go past what I knew was the turnoff to my hotel. I pointed that out, and at the same time a traffic policeman in the center of the circle started yelling at him. He pulled over and told me he couldn't take me to the hotel. I never knew why. I paid him part of what we had agreed on, and went on, on foot.

I was joined then by four boys who enjoyed talking to me and pretending, in English, to be poor – at least I am pretty sure they were pretending since if they were very poor, I doubt they'd have spoken English. They hammed it up so much, and then burst into laughter. I took their picture and gave one of them some



Four boys, from trip

money to share, and they then stayed with me for a long block, until I got to the major street in

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front of my hotel. Crossing this was always a challenge, so I turned my attention to that. A couple of policemen happened along and were crossing, so I crossed too, keeping them between me and the traffic. The boys gave up on me at that point and continued down their side of the street. They had found something else to amuse them, but one of them waved to me as I turned in to my hotel.

(It is raining cats and dogs outside, or whatever the local equivalent is. But it is still one hour before my flight, so I imagine it will clear up before we go. We've had severe storms every evening but one since I've been here. The monsoon must be starting early.)

Friday evening, I decided to go to the other main restaurant in the hotel for dinner. I'm glad I did. It was a vegetarian restaurant in the most opulent setting I've ever seen for a restaurant. The room was apparently the ballroom of an old mansion, decorated with white columns all around, chandeliers, white plaster angels adorning the curved ceiling, etc. And at one end of the room was a low stage.

I hadn't succeeded in eating much Nepali food since I'd been here, so I ordered the Newari Thalli. A thalli is an Indian meal of half a dozen different dishes served around a bowl of rice. Newari was the main ethnic group from which the Nepalese in Kathmandu were descended. The food was all very good, starting with some sort of bean cake as an appetizer, and a thin spicy soup of potatoes and bamboo shoots. The dishes of the thalli itself were like Indian curries, but without so much spice. One of them was as yoghurt (what people here and in India call curd) that I wasn't wild about. And there was another dish that was sweet that I also skipped. But I liked the other four that were based on lentils, beans, spinach, and cauliflower. After I'd made a good dent in each of them, the waiter came around and filled up the bowls again. My kind of place!

The reason for the stage turned out to be that there was entertainment. A group of Nepali ethnic musicians and dancers performed for us throughout dinner. There were only five of us to watch, by the way. An American couple, a Sikh couple, and me, all sitting in a row along one side of the room. I'd have found it hard to work up any enthusiasm as a performer for that small a crowd, but that didn't seem to be a problem. And the performers all seemed to have a lot of fun.

Most of the numbers they did you can probably picture. Men sitting on the floor playing a drum, a flute, and an accordion-like instrument, with sometimes a woman, also sitting, singing. In front of them half a dozen men and women danced, wearing different costumes for each dance. It was very pretty, both to see and to hear – more than I can convey here.

But there were also several novelty numbers I want to mention. One, in honor of the hotel, was The Yak and Yeti dance: two dancers dressed as a yak (some sort of horned goat-like animal from the mountains) and another dancer dressed as a yeti – the abominable snowman. The yak

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even came out into the audience and managed to get some money from the other American man. Another number was The Peacock: one of the dancers dressed very effectively as a peacock, including a tiny head on a long skinny neck that must have been operated from inside the costume with a stick. The peacock's head seemed to be looking at things and pecking at things, including the head of the Sikh, who was not amused. At the end, the peacock's tail came up to finish the routine.

But the best number started with a man who came out dancing in a white woman's dress, with straps of bells on his ankles and across his chest, and with a cylindrical headdress of feathers. He came out dancing and jingling like an American Indian, carrying a drum that he was beating like a tom-tom. But he was beating the drum on the bottom, not the top, using a curved drumstick. After he had danced for a while, another fellow came out in just drab brown pants and shirt, but with something under his shirt making his stomach bulge. He was carrying a flat pan with a candle burning in the center of it. He put the pan down on the stage, where both men then sat behind it and engaged in an animated conversation that made no sense to me. Except that the second man wanted the first, the one in the white dress, to cure him of the stomach bulge.

That led to various incantations and wavings of arms, and then the second man lit two small torches from the candle in the pan. The ends of the torches were burning balls, apparently each about the size of a golf ball. He gave them to the man in white, who: stuck one torch in his mouth and put out the flame; stuck the other torch in his mouth and took it away, leaving both the torch and his mouth on fire; and lit the first torch with his mouth. There was more, but you get the idea. After this, if anybody cares, the second man's bulge was gone, the two of them danced in celebration, and they left the stage. As the other American man said, "Well that got my attention."

Today I got up at a more civilized hour and, after checking out of the hotel, hired a car to take me to the neighboring town of Bhaktapur. I did this with some trepidation, because my trip to Nagarkot the day before had gone through the edge of Bhaktapur. I'd be repeating the part of that trip I liked the least, through the city. But the guidebook said that Bhaktapur was much less touched by the modern world than Kathmandu, almost medieval. I wanted to see it.

I'm glad I did. After looking briefly at the many temples in its own central square, I wandered down side streets and found few signs of modern life. The buildings were old, the people all doing things they could have done for centuries. They took little notice of me. I did feel a bit like I had stepped into the past. I also felt like I had stepped into something else at one point. I was so fascinated that I forgot to watch my footing – always dangerous in Nepal. My heel had landed in a fresh pile of something's, or somebody's, shit. I wasn't being totally ignored, it turned out: when I looked up, a girl caught my eye and grinned.

Not everything I saw in Bhaktapur was medieval, though. In one place some old stonework that must have been left from some building happened to form a sort of platform, maybe two or three feet high at the edge of an intersection of two lanes. Two boys had rigged a string across the middle of this platform and were playing ping pong using the string as the net.

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I was back from Bhaktapur with some time to spare before my flight, so I went back to Thamil for a bit. I wanted to get some lunch, so I looked over the many small restaurants that were there. I noticed one with a sign that advertised goulash soup and fried yak cheese, among other things. I went in and had those two things as my lunch. The goulash soup was very good, with lots of meat. I wondered what kind it was, since one normally doesn't get beef here. The fried yak cheese turned out to be cheese sticks, exactly like what we have at home made of mozzarella. The flavor was slightly different, but not much.

Sunday, June 2 - Delhi

Well, I'm back in an airport, this time waiting for my flight to Amsterdam. This is routine, and I wouldn't write any more, except for one thing.

When I returned to Delhi last night and rode my taxi into the city, Delhi had a whole new look for me. It has always seemed a poor and rather shabby place. But after Nepal, it looked rich and clean. The buildings looked solid, the streets broad and clean, and the people seemed to have a self-confidence that I'd missed in Kathmandu. Of course, I was riding only through New Delhi, not the old poorer parts of the city, but I still think the difference was real.

[I'll close with a few more of my photos from Nepal.]



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