

May 2003 Annapurna Trek

May 9 (Kathmandu)

I snap awake at 5 am feeling great, have what turns out to be a cold shower, and go for a walk round Thamel. By 7, I've been almost everywhere and I'm ravenously hungry. I figure I'll have coffee at the Northfield Café, but when I sit down, I can't resist having a banana pancake as well. I'm pretty confident it won't blunt my appetite for Mike's Breakfast at 8. It's a very fine pancake and indeed I have no trouble packing away Mike's Special cheese and veggy omelet as well.

We come back to the tour company and establish that John can get his money back when the cashier comes in later, then go to a different trekking company that Ilana found and liked and ask them about a trek to Jomsum from Pokhara. We all like the owner and agree to go. We already established over breakfast that we want to stay together. So we leave for Pokhara on Sunday morning, the day after tomorrow.

We walk around window-shopping and have lunch at Rum Doodle, which turns out to be disappointing, then back to the hotel because it starts to rain. We meet an old man with a black beard who points delightedly at my beard and exclaims, "*You white babu, me black babu!*" A babu is a venerable grandfather.



White Babu

The rain continues but it's only light, so I go out in search of presents for Felicity. I've bought fifteen books so far for myself. I go in search of a yak-wool sweater and/or scarf. I find some whose wool is rather coarse, then go to another store where I'm told there is no pure yak-wool clothing except in the mountains because the traders lump all wool together, yak, sheep and goat, so everything you see in Kathmandu is a random blend. John suggests I wait until the Jomsum trek.

The rain is now increasing. Suddenly, I hear the "*Om Mani Padme Hum*" CD playing, go to the store and buy a copy. I heard it playing at Bodnath and it stuck in my mind all through the Sikkim trek. The storekeeper also plays me a singing bowl CD which he

says is good for meditation. I listen but conclude once again that I'm just not suited to the discipline.

Then I see a nearby carpet store and since it's still raining, I go inside. The owner promptly begins unrolling carpets for my inspection. Soon there are over twenty on the floor, five of which are quite tempting. One is very beautiful, green overall with squares each holding a different design. A silk carpet, which I've never examined closely before. The colors change dramatically as the angle of the light alters. Magic.

"How much?" I ask. I'm amazed by the answer because nothing I've bought so far cost more than twenty dollars. It's obvious I like the carpet, but I say it's far more than I can afford. Eventually, the owner persuades me to make an offer. *"Five hundred dollars"* I say. *"Eight hundred"* he responds. *"Sorry"* I say, *"I just can't"*. *"OK"* he says, *"Not 500, not 800. 800 minus 500 is 300, half 300 is 150, 500 plus 150 is 650. You are my first customer today, no tourists come this year and business is very bad, so I'll sell you the carpet for \$650"*. I wonder how I could even have started this negotiation and realize it's because the carpet is so beautiful. *"OK"* I finally say, and we shake hands. It was made in Kashmir. It looks like all these carpets come from there.



While he's wrapping the carpet and processing my credit card, I notice scarves of silk and pashmina. They are also very good, so I buy one. *"Look at this silk bedspread, sir, lined on the back with silk, also."* It is, no surprise, very rich in a soothing way. *"How*

much" I ask dismissively, expecting another astronomical amount. *"Three hundred fifty dollars, sir, but I will sell it to you for two hundred, sir."* At last sanity returns, or perhaps a baser emotion, caution or belated self-denial. I say I must recover from spending so much money on the carpet and will perhaps come back tomorrow.

Back at the hotel, I check the date of my flight home and discover it's May 21st, not the 22nd as I thought. The 22nd is the day I arrive home. I check with John and the flight from Jomsum to Kathmandi leaves before 8 am on May 20th, so I could get back here in time even if the weather in Jomsum prevents flights to Pokhara. Flying from Pokhara to Kathmandu won't be a problem. Meanwhile, the trek operator has delivered all the plane tickets to John so we won't have to go to his office in the rain, and he'll come back to the hotel at 10 tomorrow morning to give us the rest of the details and answer any questions.

We have dinner at KC's and it's quite good. My buffalo steak is rather tasteless, as John had warned, because buffalo meat is very lean, but since it's a "garlic steak" the meat doesn't need to be tasty. To my great surprise, I don't enjoy my beer, but David is willing to finish it to save embarrassment. Higher order recycling is the proper term for his act, he says.

After searching for a store where Ilana can buy a one-stringed guitar for her godson and locating it only tentatively because it's closed, I set off to replenish my stock of rehydration salts and get the cardamom we couldn't find in Sikkim because I didn't start the search soon enough. I get not just small cardomoms that Pranai and Kishore told me are best, but also small green ones and large ones for comparison purposes. I remember I'll need a water bottle for the next trek because the one from our 1989 trip out West suffered a cracked loop in Sikkim. I forgot to buy a carabiner to clip my poles to my pack, though.

May 10 (Kathmandu)

Today's newspaper reports that a bus driver from Biritnagar went into the fields to answer the call of nature and picked up what he thought was a stone to clean himself, but which was in fact a bomb that exploded in his hand. He trudged through the night into the town, where his hand was amputated. I wonder how the man will be affected socially. It will be obvious he can no longer clean himself with his left hand, so his only remaining hand will be unclean.

The newspaper also reports that Iraqi looters went into one of Saddam Hussein's palaces, placed a bomb in the ornamental fishpond, and *"made off with their piscine booty"*.

We go to Mike's Breakfast again. His name, I notice, is actually Mike Frame, not Mike Breakfast. Back at the hotel we meet the tour operator. All is arranged. We also learn that they do tours to Kanchenjunga and Mustang, or anywhere else in Nepal for that matter, but the permit for Mustang is \$900 for two weeks, so they have difficulty finding enough clients.

Then John leads us on a tour to and around Durbar Square, after which Ilana and David go to meet a contact of Ilana's and John and I return to Thamel.



I leave John at Shona's trekking store after getting a couple of carabiners. I finally find a sweater Felicity will like that appears to be pure yak wool. It's very soft and has a

subtle design. That leads to buying a yak wool scarf and hat to match. I return to the silk carpet store and offer \$100 for the silk bedspread. We settle on \$150, after which he tries to sell me a magnificent \$4,000 carpet. He claims it cost him \$3,323, but eventually works his way down to a price of \$3,000, just to raise cash, he says. I have no trouble resisting this one.

I buy two rolls of prayer flags, then go back to the Tibetan antique store for a prayer wheel. A fairly good reasonably large one with a prayer roll inside, like the ones I saw being used in Sikkim, is only \$7. The man also shows me several hundred-plus year old prayer books that I have a hard time resisting, and a silver dorje and an antique wooden mandala for printing on paper that I fail to resist. (Let this retail madness be a warning. I never do much shopping ordinarily. I'd fallen in love with the place.)

I now have a large weight of purchases to take home, as I discover when I pack my kit bag for the Jomsum trek and everything else in the black bag I'll leave at the hotel. The porter will have it easy for the next ten days but I really need one to carry my stuff back to the US. Necon Air ground a small hole in my rubberized bag. Perhaps David's duct tape will fix it temporarily, but it really needs a bicycle tire patch.

I thought John must be teetotal since he never has beer and didn't have any of Kishore's heavily pushed scotch, but we go for dinner to the Old Vienna and he has a couple of glasses of red wine. He used to travel a lot in France and greatly enjoyed the wine, but where he lives, in a remote village, everywhere he might go involves driving, so he doesn't drink alcohol at all when he's at home.

John got his interest in history from his father, who was an accountant in the Civil Service. After he got fed up with post-grad research, John lived on a boat off the west coast of Scotland and was a marine salvage diver for three years. The cold was too much for him in the end, so he cast around for a job that isn't behind a desk, and settled on the police.

One of John's historical projects was participation in an underwater archaeological survey off the south coast of Sicily. A later one was helping to build a Greek trireme. No triremes have survived, so there was no example to copy. There were just notes about them in stories. They were known to be about 120 feet long and only 16 feet wide because foundations of shipyards do exist, but there was a mystery. How could such a long narrow craft avoid breaking in the middle, and how could it support three banks of oars?

A classical scholar finally theorized, sometime in the 1930s, that a rope, bow to stern, must have provided the support, but it wasn't until the 1970s when a retired naval architect was casting around for a retirement activity that the engineering work was done and a specific design developed. John was the ship's engineer responsible for repairs, and one of the 170 oarsmen. The trireme did, in fact, work. They could row it at 10 knots for 6 to 8 hours at a time and it was highly maneuverable.

May 11 (Katmandu -> Hile)

Our flight to Pokhara is in a turboprop at 5,000 feet. Boy, they're noisy. Clouds hide the mountains but I can see the hills below are heavily wooded with some terracing and the valleys are wider than in Sikkim although there aren't many of them. We land beside a lake, get bussed to our tour company's office, complete a form, wait at the Pokhara Mike's Breakfast for the permits, then get on the bus to the trail head. There's

been a severe fuel shortage in Asia since the invasion of Iraq and we have to stop at three gas stations to get just a couple of liters. It's reminiscent of the US in 1973.



As we set off from the bus, we're followed by a couple of young Tibetan women (they were born in Nepal but their parents are Tibetan refugees) with day-packs full of handicrafts. Nomo is the one who targets me. They walk with us, pleasantly pleading their plight, until we stop for a soda and I buy a rosary of yak bone studded with coral and turquoise and a pendant with a design I hope Felicity will like. Since I don't bargain very effectively, Nomo also gives me a bracelet *"to protect you on the trek"*.

We continue for a couple of hours winding along beside a stream, stop at a tea house while a violent rain storm passes, and arrive at Hile, where there are half a dozen old houses and new tea houses like alpine lodges. As John says, this is very different from trekking in Sikkim. The trail is very well established and every incline has regular stone steps. This was the first trekking route in Nepal and it's the most popular.

Our guide is Shiva, who chatters all the time because that's his personality and this is his first time as a guide, and Rhesum is the cook. He's been trekking fifteen years, starting when he was 16, and is calmer than Shiva but John wonders if he'll cause conflict by usurping Shiva's role as the porters' boss. It's Rhesum who introduces the crew and he explains how he trains everyone to do everything because he wants to help them develop. One porter is a woman aged about forty. John says that's unusual but it can be very good to have a woman in the crew because it helps calm the guys who might otherwise be testosterone crazed.

Rhesum tells me he's very lucky and happy because he's doing well at something he loves. His mother died when he was two and it was a long time before he learned she would never come back. He has older siblings who teased him and his father used to beat him so he played truant from school and then ran away to Kathmandu, but all is forgiven now he's making his way in the world and has grown up strong. He likes to go back home and help on the farm, is married and has two sons.

I ask Rhesum where he most likes to trek. Mustang, he says, because it's the least changed area and there are so many interesting things there.

Also on the trek is Nadia, a young woman from Canada whose English mother, a nurse, and Pakistani father, a power engineer, immigrated to Manitoba in the 70s when people with such skills were greatly wanted there. She just finished college with a thesis about the Afghan refugees on the Pakistan border and came to Pakistan a couple of months ago to try to help them. She just completed an Everest trek and after this, she plans to work or volunteer in Nepal for a while, then do the same in India and then in England. She hopes this will clarify what she wants to do longer term.

I find a piece of quartz that's covered top and bottom with a silvery film and that looks a lot like a tortoise. It feels like a good omen, although the weather so far is just as bad as it was in Sikkim. We meet a man who thinks John is my son and Nadia kindly suggests it's because the shape of our eyes is similar.

After dinner, Ilana tells us she may have to turn back tomorrow because she's developed a throat infection that's making her very weak. Rhesum is determined she'll be better in the morning. Positive thinking leads to positive results, he's certain. We have many options, he says, so Ilana will be able to get well and continue the trek.

May 12 (Hile -> Birethanti)



Today is bad, the first day of trekking I've not enjoyed at all. I was up all night with diarrhea and vomiting that left me exhausted and in pain with stomach cramps. I guess I never entirely shook off my bug from before the trip, I had too much meat too soon after my relapse in Darjeeling, and had too much of Rhesum's excellent garlic bread last night. (I later realize it's impossible to avoid at least a mild attack of dysentery here. In fact, the Tibetan word for diarrhea is almost synonymous with '*going to India*').

We climb 2,600 feet to Birethanti, which should have taken three hours but which takes me five. Our original plan was to walk another three hours after lunch to get quickly to the mountain area but I just can't do it, so we camp right after lunch.

May 13 (Birethanti -> Ghorapani)

I sleep soundly for sixteen hours and feel fine when I wake in the morning. Although Ilana's cold has developed more, she's forcing herself on. But now David has it, too. We're lucky today's trek is an easy 2,000 feet climb to Ghorapani ('horse watering place') near Poon Hill, which we'll climb before sunrise tomorrow.



The trail continued very civilized, six feet wide, with stone steps on every incline, and frequent tea houses. When John first came here, they were just people's stone huts, but now they're elaborate wooden structures with seating areas and stocks of soda, beer and Bagpiper whiskey. I prefer Sikkim. At tonight's campsite there's even a separate Ladies and Gents toilet. They're squats with a plastic bucket of water and a small jug to wash yourself.

I have a very light lunch of plain white rice washed down with hot water with chunks of fresh ginger. Rhesum tells us about a group of young guys he took trekking a few years ago. They ran short of time and the only way to finish on schedule was across a recent landslide. *"We can go across" he told them "but it's very risky, or we can go back and round. One way is 100% risk, the other is safe. It doesn't matter to me because I have*

no wife or children. You must choose, but if we go this way, we must run like hell to get across." Being mid-20s males, they chose the landslide route and Rhesum raced across it to demonstrate. Four others raced after him but the last guy walked. Rhesum was yelling at him to run when a huge boulder broke loose. *"Stop!"* Rhesum cried. The guy did, and the boulder tumbled just in front of him. It missed him but loosened the scree and the guy began to slide down towards the river. Rhesum tore off his pack, raced to the river's edge, grabbed a tree and flung his leg toward the guy who by now was in the river. *"Grab on!"* he yelled and the guy managed to catch hold. He was saved and they had a huge party when they got back to town.

After lunch I lie down in my tent. When our old friend thunder wakes me, I move into my sleeping bag's comforting warmth. When I wake again there's a fine view of Annapurna South and Dhaulagiri far to the north. It's the world's fourth highest peak.

May 14 (Ghorapani -> Tatopani)

We wake at 4:30 and I feel almost normal. I make the 1,000 foot ascent of Poon Hill without a pause in 35 minutes. The magnificent view of Dhaulagiri, Annapurna, Fishtail and other peaks keeps us up here for several hours and by the time we start the day's trek it's sunny and 70F but there are rain clouds careering over the mountains.



I'm feeling so much better that I go on alone. I take the wrong fork and start towards Beni but a villager suspects my mistake and sets me right.

It's a 6,000 foot descent from Poon Hill to Tatopani down a valley of fertile terraces with barley, wheat, potatoes and corn, and substantial villages, including one with two temples. They have three stories as Buddhist gompas do, but they are entirely white and have no prayer flags. Rhesum says the people here are *"sort of Buddhist but they sacrifice chickens in the temples every full moon"*.

We pass grazing buffalo and pack-trains of ponies, and children who instead of saying "Namaste" as in Sikkim say "*Namaste, sweet!*" and hold out their hands.



We also pass women drying spinach and threshing grain, and several shallow rectangular structures. The first few are dry but lower ones contain water and we decide they're buffalo wallows.



We cross a landslide that shines very brightly in the sun and is a silvery gray that's almost blue. It's very brittle, in thin flakes and very unstable. At the end of the day we camp beside the river in what's claimed to be the world's deepest gorge.

There's a hot spring here at Tatopani, which means "hot water". It feeds a large eighteen-inch deep rectangular pool and the water's hot enough that you can only stay in for a few minutes at a time. The fee is 10 rupees during the day and 50 rupees for all night. When David, Ilana, Nadia and I go before dinner it rains, which is blissful when you're submerged in hot water, and when Nadia, Rhesum and I go again after dinner it's even more beautiful because the moon is almost full. This is the perfect honeymoon place for David and Ilana.

Half a dozen Israelis come to the pool after dinner and the proprietors, who bid for the concession and pay several thousand dollars for the season, come to get their payment. The interaction becomes belligerent, and the proprietor impounds one of the men's sandals, saying he doesn't believe the guy will come back and pay in the morning as promised. Rhesum doesn't believe him either. If Israelis come to his office, he tells them his treks wouldn't suit them and he says if Israelis go to tea houses the owners ask for payment up-front because too many Israelis skip without paying.

I get my first leech on the way back from the pool. I don't feel anything but suddenly notice an inch-long line of blood on my arm.

We have chicken with noodles for dinner. Rhesum claims his boys bought the chicken "*in a store*" but John and I reckon he patronized the chicken man we met on the trail with a wire cage on his back, four chicken-stories high and five chickens wide. I wondered if he was making a special run for the chicken sacrificers since tomorrow is the full moon and Buddha's birthday. It'll be a bad day for fowl.

Rhesum claims he can cook anything "*and if I cook something it must be really good*". When he was learning, his pans were almost destroyed by the end of a trek. He told his

boss that always happens when you melt snow above 4,000 meters. The night before last he made a very airy chocolate cake and tonight it was an apple pie so good that John, who hardly eats anything, had a second slice and pronounced it the best apple pie of his life.



The chicken man

Shiva told three Nepali riddles over dinner. *"What is a stick you can't use, a bull you can't tame, and a bread you can't eat?"* He's in fits of laughter when we give up. The answers are a snake, a tiger and the sun.



Harvesting grain



Threshing the grain

Rhesum tells us another story. He took a honeymoon couple trekking in the monsoon season and visibility was so poor they got lost. They slogged on trying to find some landmark that Rhesum recognized and the girl began to cry. They slogged on and on and on until at last Rhesum glimpsed a village he thought he'd seen before. The only way to get there without losing his bearings was via a very steep valley through very dense vegetation, and before they were half way down their bodies were covered in leeches. They brushed off handfuls at a time as they scrambled along but they were immediately covered with more. They were so covered with blood when they reached the village that all the villagers ran away in terror.



Ilana also tells us a story. She was planning a special service at her synagogue and centered it on Louis Armstrong's song, *"What a Wonderful Day"*. It was perfect for the

theme but the cantor was horrified and kept suggesting alternatives. Just before the service, when the issue was still unresolved, the cantor picked up a car she had just bought, turned on the radio, and there was Satchmo singing that song. She figured it was a sign and immediately called Ilana.

May 15 (Tatopani -> Kopchepani)

Ilana's cold is better and she can talk more normally, which is a relief because she seemed all set to develop the Nepali woman's screech, but she hurt her knee on the long trek downhill yesterday and David's cold is pretty bad. Ilana is very concerned about slowing us down and is trying to work out what mix of homeopathic and prescription medicines would be most beneficial while John and Rhesum encourage her not to worry about tomorrow until it comes. We'll do a very easy trek today. John says one of the essential skills for a trekker is the ability to spend long periods of time alone in one's tent in a sleeping bag because you can be snowed in or unable to proceed if one of your party is sick. We can all practice later today.

While the gear is packed I gaze north at South Nilgri, framed perfectly by the steep gorge, its summit and east ridge highlighted by the sun. It's a beautiful day. It occurs to me that one's life has a predetermined trajectory but we're not provided with weather or topographic maps, so unless our life is very sort we can't know how much the weather will blow us off course or where we might land. That makes it much more fun.



We set off beside the river. It's flowing strongly even now before the monsoon and the water is thick with gray sediment. It must be spectacular during the monsoon.

We meet a friendly man planting something at wide intervals in a very stony field. The only thing I can think of that I'd plant so far apart is pumpkins. "*What are you planting?*" John asks. "*Pumpkins and cucumbers*". Further on there's a young man outside his family's cottage with a weight bar like those in fitness centers except the weights are mill stones. Some of the houses we pass have intricately carved windows, doors and roof edges like the Newari work in Kathmandu. The Newaris came from the Kathmandu valley and their work was much sought after.



We walk slowly and today's trail is easy but Ilana's knee is very painful so we stop for the day at Kopchepani instead of going on to Ghasla. "*No problem*", John says. He and I can still get to Jomsum for our flight to Kathmandu on the 20th without having to go on ahead. There's a softball net near the campsite and the porters start a game with some locals. Nadia joins in and later, most unusually, two young women, one in Tibetan dress, also join. There's thunder yet again in the afternoon, but the rain isn't so heavy. So far, it has rained every second afternoon. There's a rock wall behind us that's vertical and at least 200 feet high. A small hawk nests up there. The opposite side of the valley is steeply sloped. Very little sunlight gets down here, and not much water.

John and I chat for a while after practicing solitary festering in our tents. He talks a bit about his father, who had perfect recall of anything he heard or read and could pass as a native of France, Germany and Italy. When they went on vacation, he'd read the guidebooks to prepare and then leave them at home. During WWII, he was in the Ultra group that cracked the Enigma code, which John and his mother only discovered

because of a TV program made in 1976 when the 30 year Official Secrets Act period elapsed. They were watching because John was always fascinated by codes and John's dad was sitting reading. Suddenly they heard "*Load of rubbish*". "*What's that?*" John's mother asked. "*Load of rubbish*" he repeated, "*We never did that*". He was a very quiet man and they never got much out of him, but they did learn that he'd been spotted as potential talent despite his attempt to remain in obscurity in the cookhouse brigade. He hadn't been able to think of any further excuses to lay low, and one thing led to another.

John also told me about the debt problem here in the mountains, which is why the Maoists get support. The women do all the field work except plowing, they gather the firewood, raise the children and animals and make the family's clothes. They do all the subsistence work, in fact, while the men do whatever they can to raise cash to cut the family debt.



After dinner the porters play cards as all porters seem to do in every spare moment; playing cards litter all the trails. We also learn that many of these guys are keen dancers to Hindi music, especially if brandy and a TV are available as they are here.

May 16 (Kopchepani -> Lete)

I've developed Ilana's cold but it's a delightful day, sunny, 75F and with a breeze. Since it rained yesterday afternoon, it should stay dry all day today. Our walk this morning is easy with just a couple of steep climbs. We see four eagles gliding on the sunny side of the valley, presumably juveniles because adults wouldn't fly in a group. They have a guano-stained ledge as their base. We stop at the army checkpoint, which is manned by four soldiers. Two are lying happily against a rock, one with his head on the other's shoulder and the other with his arm round the first. Another handles our paperwork and the fourth practices aiming a machine gun at the bridge over the river. Further on at Ghasa, where we stop for lunch, there's another little army emplacement. Nadia asks the soldiers if she can take their picture and they cheerfully agree.

We've now reached the old kingdom of Mustang and it's very different here. At the top of the climb to Lete a plain opens up with large fields of grain and a twenty-foot wide stone roadway that's framed by four foot high stone walls. The road goes for over a mile with quite substantial stone houses on both sides. This is a much wealthier community than any we've seen before because there's so much flat land here. When Rhesum was here ten years ago, the road didn't exist and there were only a few houses. Many Tibetan refugees continue to come here.



We camp outside the Everest Lodge. You can't see Everest but Dhaulagiri is a gigantic 6,000 meters high presence to the north. If it's clear in the morning, there'll be an exceptional view of Dhaulagiri as well as Annapurna to the east. We're here because Rhesum told the boys they could stop wherever they like in this village and the daughters of this house are beautiful. They're Tibetan, confident and full of life.



For dinner we have quiche by special request from Nadia. It took several days for Rhesum to find someone with enough milk to sell. He's still searching for lemons for lemon meringue pie; he could use lemon curd but *"that wouldn't be right"*. I ask him to tell me more about his family.

Rhesum's grandfather joined the British army and when his time was up, he was paid his "salary" in coin, which was measured by being tipped into a large urn, the top of which was then leveled using a stick. He had signed on for a relatively long time, so his urn was a big one and it took several days to carry it home to his village in the mountains. He still has the scars on his back.

Rhesum's father left the mountains and went to the Chitwan area when he was young because he could get free land in the forest. He cleared the trees and built the terraces himself. Rhesum and his dad get on well now because, unlike his brothers, when his dad decides he'd like to go off on a trip somewhere, Rhesum encourages him. His brothers tell their dad he's too old for such things and should stay home.

David has bronchitis and Ilana has re-injured her knee, but my cold is gone.

May 17 (Lete -> Tukche)

There are great views of the mountains between 5 and 6 and then it begins to cloud up. We set off on an easy walk up a wide riverbed of round stones in fine gravel that's half a mile wide in some places. At this time of year, the river itself is only 30 feet wide at most and wooden beams are laid across in a few places so you can cross. The trail for the rainy season goes along the hillside. There are many conifers and several horse chestnuts.

David is taking Cipro and is very weak. Ilana is not well but she is in good spirits.



We stop for lunch in Larjung, a village that's being partially rebuilt after a big landslide. There are a dozen caves in the soft rock overlooking the village that may once have been used by pilgrims and Nadia jokes that Bin Laden could be hiding there now. Since it's only eleven o'clock, much earlier than we expected, we decide to walk on to Tukche after lunch. We're now only a day's walk from Jomsum.

The 1950 French expedition that made the first ascent of Annapurna was based in Tukche. The town looks very old. I go for a walk and find a huge mani wall and a long row of prayer wheels.





Then I notice the Tukche Distillery, look through its door and see a fine courtyard. I go in to admire the carved screens over the windows and a young girl motions me through another doorway. Now I'm in the distillery where a woman of about 60 says, *"It's finished for today. I'm cleaning now. When the brandy is ready, it goes through here (pointing to a pipe at ceiling level) and comes out here"*. I follow her and we emerge in the tasting room, the place where it *"comes out here"*. *"Do you like brandy?"* she asks. *"You like apple, apricot, carrot or orange?"* Obviously I can't refuse, so I say apple, and it's good. *"What you like next, apricot?"* That isn't so good. *"You try orange"* she says, and that turns out to be the best, rather like Cointreau. *"The quarter bottle are all same price, 60 rupees,"* she tells me, *"Full size bottles all 120 rupees, but orange is 200"*. I only have 100 rupees with me, so I get a quarter bottle of orange. I ask how long the distillery has been here. *"Twenty years, but my house is 203 years"* and I realize she lives in the house with the magnificent carvings.





Nadia explores in a different direction and finds a map showing the location of many gompas. John and I examine one while we wait for the others and find it has something John has never seen in a gumpa before. Two deer heads made of clay but with real antlers decorated with ribbons are standing next to the altar. Shiva promises to give us a tour of all the gompas. *"We will get in. I know the lama"* he says economically, which turns out to mean something more like; *"(I hope) we will get in (but if it's locked) I know (gompas have lamas and perhaps) the lama (will open the gate)"*. The only one that isn't locked and empty of lamas is the one John and I already saw.

Our evening meal is in the TV room of the hotel. There's a table set over a pit with cushions on the floor around the edges. We sit on the cushions with our legs under the table. There are hot coals in a container in the center of the pit, so it's warm under the table. The TV is set to the Nepali equivalent of MTV.

Rhesum is chatting with a couple of people who were on one of his previous treks. He's emerging as a wilder character than he seemed. We're too sedate for him, and too sickly. We're enjoying each other, however, including Nadia, who's 23 and quite impressed by our spriteliness, which she hadn't expected a group of 50 plus year olds could exhibit.

Light rain follows dinner. Our tents are on a small mud-covered flat roof behind the hotel. All houses here have flat roofs because not much rain gets this far north. Neat piles of firewood three or four feet high are stacked along the edges of the roofs and the center is used for threshing grain, drying spinach, or inspecting the view.

Shiva's attempts to set up a way for us to reach this roof were surprisingly fanciful but quite impractical, no surprise because we'd already realized this crew lacks a sense of space. One porter would never have gotten into his rain poncho without David taking him step by step through getting the poncho the right way up and the right way round, and putting his head through the right hole. Shiva couldn't visualize if any grouping of heaped tables and chairs would fit between our tents and serve as a ladder and kept trying the most remarkable combinations. I hope Nepal never starts a space program.

May 18 (Tukche -> Jomsum)

I go for a pre-breakfast walk and take many pictures then return to the distillery, sample the carrot brandy, and buy a large bottle of orange brandy for Felicity. The proprietor says everything will be fine if I gather my whole family and we finish the bottle all at once. She's pointing out that it's in a beer bottle and the bottle cap can't be resealed. Or, she says, if I don't have a large family I could try a cork.



Jomsum and Tukche are at almost the same altitude. It takes only three or four hours to walk from one to the other but it's quite tiring because there's a very strong wind. Even though it's a tail wind it's tiring because there's so much dust and buffeting.

It's less cloudy today. Very little rain gets this far before the monsoon, so clouds don't either. Snow-clad peaks are visible very much higher than the valley sides but the light

is too bright for photography. We pass many Tibetans, some with shops and others with jewelry and curios spread alongside the trail. I stop at one of each and buy more presents for Felicity. The riverbed is still half a mile wide here.



The hills on the east side are patchily covered with conifers while those on the west are dry and have only small shrubs. There's extensive erosion at lower levels. It looks a lot like Arizona. John says the sections where the valley bottom is widest look similar to the central plains of Tibet. Settlements there, too, are set in a plain surrounded by arid hills and have a few flat-roofed houses and somewhat fertile fields encircled by a stone wall.

Jomsum turns out to be sprawling and unattractive, quite unlike Tukche which is smaller, older and very attractive. Now I see why the road through Lete is so wide. Its people came south from Jomsum and Tukche, which both have wide streets.

May 19 (Jomsum)

I get up at 5 and take many pictures. Half way down the main street a couple of women set out cabbages, cauliflower, and other vegetables on blankets, which passing commuters inspect with interest.



A bugle sounds at the Royal Nepal Army High Altitude Mountain Warfare Training Camp at 6 and camo-clad soldiers trot along the main street with ancient rifles. They walk up to a small temple, circle it, ring the bells, walk the rest of the way up the hill, and come trotting back an hour later in loose formation.



I find myself sitting overlooking the airstrip at 6:30 and decide to take a look at the plane we'll get to Pokhara at 7:05 tomorrow morning. It lands at 7:30 and is back in the air five minutes later.

While we're having breakfast John remembers a colleague who was promoted and transferred to a small town. He came back for a visit and they asked what it was like in his new place. *"Well" he said, "we don't go out and watch the traffic lights change before breakfast because if we did, there'd be nothing to do later."*

My opinion of Rhesum and Shiva has gone in opposite directions. Rhesum made one excellent apple pie and one poor one, two good chocolate cakes, and after the first few days, not very good food at any time. He's been attentive to Nadia but made increasingly little effort with the rest of us. Shiva isn't good at anticipating or even remembering what we want but he always tries hard and truly wants us to enjoy the

trek. His mother died on the mountain when he was two so he won't do technical climbing. His father remarried when he was six and Shiva and his sister were raised by his grandparents. That was the last time Shiva saw his father, who now wants to see Shiva again, but Shiva doesn't want to see him.

Shiva tried to get into the British army after he left home when he was sixteen, but he didn't understand the need for bribes, so after what he thought was the right application process, he was told he wasn't qualified. When he learned he should have offered baksheesh, he wanted no more to do with such things and became a porter. He used as much of his wages as possible for English lessons after buying shoes, a jacket, a sleeping bag and other things that made his first treks miserable by their absence.

After breakfast, David, Ilana, John and I go for a walk east of the river to a Bon monastery where the lama says we're allowed to take pictures. John says that's because very few tourists come here so the flash from cameras that creates humidity and damages paintings isn't a problem here. Then we go south to a Buddhist gompa high above the valley with magnificent views of Nilgri and Dhaulgiri.



The Tibetan word 'gonpa' means 'solitary place' and this location meets the criterion. It's over a thousand years old and is set in a rather derelict garden with a stone wall and a gated entrance. There's a small building that protects a footprint made by Padmasambhava, who introduced Buddhism to Tibet. I search the stone outcrop for a foot-shaped depression and fail so I must be content with the two huge ochre foot outlines on a cloth on the wall.

Next, we pass three large stupas, also ochre, and then there's the monastery. Gompas usually have three stories and are rectangular but this is a rambling structure with two courtyards, several places of worship, living quarters, and a substantial area that we aren't shown.

This is a teaching monastery and we're shown round by a novice of about 12. I took pictures inside the Bon monastery but it feels disrespectful here so I only take pictures outside. The wind is even stronger up here than in the valley. The few areas we can

see where irrigation is possible are a stark contrast with the rest of the land. Barley and apples are the main crops.



The building with Padmasambhava's footprint



The ochre stupas

On the way to the west side of the river and back to Jomsum, I go ahead with Arby, one of the trainee guides. Arby notices a water buffalo horn that I carry back to the camp and he cleans it for me to take home.

Ilana has been trying to get John to discuss tips for the crew and he's been non-responsive in the great tradition of expedition leaders who respond to all questions by saying "*I'm glad you asked that*" and no more, but he has now relented and we're agreed. It'll be 500 rupees for each of the 4 porters, who are typically paid about 200

rupees a day, 1,000 each for the 3 cook's boys and the 3 trainee guides, all of whom have worked very hard, 1,500 for Rhesum and 2,500 for Shiva.



Young monks at the teaching monastery

Dinner is not an end-of-trek feast but soup, a bean burrito, and bananas. Nadia gives each of us a Manitoba pin. She must have brought a huge number because she's already been in Pakistan and Nepal for two or three months and she also gave pins to the crew.

May 20 (Jomsum -> Kathmandu)

It looks like Sita Air has only one plane because after it brings us from Pokhara we must wait for it to make a second round trip between Pokhara and Jomsum and then board it to fly to Kathmandu. Our taxi to the hotel is the worst yet. John sits in front because he's 6 foot 2 and can't fit in the back but his seat lists sideways and backwards because one of its side supports is broken. He clutches the door all the way so the seat won't break loose altogether, and then we immediately go for a restorative breakfast at the Northfield Café, after which I buy more rehydration salts and a few more books and maps and arrange for Pilgrims to mail all my books home.

Maybe it's because my white beard has grown so long in the last six weeks. It has quite an impact now. The security guy at Pokhara airport was so impressed by it that he waved me through without a search. Then in half an hour's stroll round Thamel, I am offered dope over a dozen times. Ilana is disappointed that although she doesn't want any, David and I both got offers and she didn't.

John and I have an excellent dinner at Old Vienna and discover we share a delight in opera. We also review the trek. John thinks Rhesum lost interest because at 32 he's been trekking a very long time, the Jomsum trek is the least challenging one there is, at 50-plus we were too different as well as boringly sick, and finally, what he really wants to be doing is the mountain biking business he plans to start after this year's monsoon. He probably thought he could handle the trek but he couldn't sustain the effort.

May 21 (Kathmandu)

I go for a last wander around Thamel and through the morning vegetable markets and take more pictures. John and I go for breakfast and then he disappears back into the hotel past the doorman who always salutes us and whom we always try to get past unobserved in a game that's always fresh.

Now I need to digest all this experience. As someone said, you start to understand what you were seeking only after you've found it. I found something on this trip.



At the airport both baggage X-ray machines are down. The security guards spend three quarters of an hour getting one to process a bag and then it crashes again. Everyone is perfectly relaxed, including the passengers.

At immigration, two officials are reading newspapers. I know they're officials because one sees me looking confused and tells me "*We wait for stamp*". We wait a quarter of an hour, the stamp comes, and I move on to the departure area to contemplate acceptance, which may be this trip's lesson.