

## April 2003 West Sikkim Trek

I had back-packed happily in the wilds of Iceland despite my unfit legs' agony. Norway, where I seized every excuse to go on business, felt like my long-forgotten home. No surprise then that I would want to join my friend David in renovating a school Ed Hillary built for the Sherpas high in the Himalayas. But the project was canceled when Maoist guerrillas made it too dangerous. "*Come to Sikkim*" said John, who I had met in Iceland. We'd never heard of it and John's responses to questions were enigmatic at best but we did not hesitate. It would be an adventure.

### April 13 (New York -> Kathmandu)

Many people are wearing surgical masks in Bangkok airport where David and I meet and I wonder if they know the masks won't really protect them from the viral SARS outbreak in China. We fly on to Nepal over terraced hills and brickworks with tall chimneys in the Kathmandu valley. The city's narrow streets are thronged with people on foot, bicycles, motorbikes, rickshaws, three wheeled tuk-tuks, and small cars. The only rule of the road is to aim for the next space. Almost everyone looks cheerful in Thamel, the tourist area where we meet John that's packed with shops selling locally made "antiques" and trekking gear with Western logos.



Our hotel room has an air conditioner that vents to what would be a fire escape if it had a ladder. A sign asks guests who haven't paid not to turn it on. I remember Steve's joke, "*If I had some bread, I could make a pickle sandwich; if I had a pickle.*" An information folder next to the bed includes a price for every item in the room including the bed, mattress, sheets, light bulbs and the buckets in the bathroom. The toilet paper is pink crepe like the streamers my mother used to decorate our front room every Christmas. We had more decorations every year because she kept buying new ones, the old ones never tore and my father was unable to choose which ones not to put up. Tonight is New Year's Eve in Nepal, so unlike us the streets are very lively. We decide to celebrate tomorrow at Mike's Breakfast.

## April 14 (Kathmandu)

After steak and eggs that are everything we dreamed of we go to a trekking store owned by an Australian and his Nepali wife where John investigates tents. We set up several on the hotel's flat roof to see which is best, then walk to Durbar Square and take a taxi to the Tibetan area, Bodnath where pilgrims circle clockwise round the stupa turning prayer wheels in the wall. On the way, I see a cart pulled by what looks like a Gravelly tractor with a one-lunger engine and a flywheel like my 1927 Stover. The taxi ride is terrifying. The roads in central Kathmandu are paved, but there are many deep potholes, and dirt roads in the outskirts.



Nepalis are very calm. I see why the '60s freaks were happy here. I'm offered marijuana twice in Durbar Square even though drug enforcement is now strict. A notice in the hotel gives the names of about thirty Westerners in jail for drug offenses who'd enjoy a visit. Back in Thamel, John takes us to an antique shop where I get a Tibetan prayer book with wooden covers. I start investigating Pilgrims Bookstore but can't figure out the system; a book about an early trek in Sikkim is opposite one about wafer scale integration and next to "The Scarlet Letter".

Our evening meal is at KC's, where I have sizzling chicken because I've read it's a favorite of trekkers. It does sizzle spectacularly, but the fowl must have been a very scrawny one. Over dinner I learn that in Nepal, if you want to say "no", "*I don't have any*" or some other negative, you say "*Chaina*". When we get back to the hotel, thunder rages and the lights keep going out.

## Apr 15 (Kathmandu -> Gangtok)

We're mobbed by boys clamoring to carry our bags at the airport for our flight to Birtnagar. John tells them we'll only pay four but, sensing our disorientation, they negotiate with us individually for dollars and pens. I should have given \$1 but gave \$5 because that's what my predator asked. I feel bad about my lack of discipline. Above the clouds, there are great views of Everest and Kanchenjunga.



At Biritnagar, we hire a taxi to take us to the Sikkim border. The houses as we drive through the flood plains are on stilts for protection from monsoon floods and to shelter the roaming cattle and goats. There are a few dogs but not so many as in Kathmandu. We pass fields of low altitude tea bushes that yield poor tea for the domestic market. At the border we change US dollars to Indian rupees via Nepali rupees, complete forms that turn out to be the wrong ones, the right forms with wrong information from a helpful soldier, and at last get our Nepali exit visas. We hire a different taxi that's authorized to cross the border, get permits to enter Sikkim for fifteen days, and hire a jeep to take us through the hills to Gangtok beside Sikkim's only major river along a road that washes out in the monsoons every year. Every encounter with the bureaucracy takes longer. In Sikkim, three men are required, each with a role only they can perform, one of which is wielding the rubber stamp.

The Indians we saw beside the road looked passive but the Sikkimese on the way to Gangtok are curious and look confident, which John says is because they're mountain folk. Fifty monkeys potter about in one section.

The Tibet Hotel in Gangtok is much more up-market than the Garuda in Thamel and has a good restaurant. We learn that our trek itinerary is in the opposite direction from what John planned and starts with a very steep gain in altitude. He'll sort that out tomorrow.

### **Apr 16 (Gangtok)**

We visit the bureaucracy to get an additional fifteen days permit to complete the trek and a permit for Yoksum because it's close to the Nepal border. The only purpose of these formalities is to provide employment. It would be quite impractical to correlate entries and exits and here in the Gangtok office the originals of all the permits are stored outside on the windowsill.



We walk to the top of Gangtok to visit a monastery where a monk is praying with a book like mine, periodically beating a drum and clashing cymbals. He's surrounded by contributions of small bills, apples and so forth and he will likely stay here for eight or more days before moving on or perhaps back to his own monastery.

We go on to the Institute of Tibetology by way of a flower show with magnificent orchids. I'm intrigued by the thankas, statues, murals and prayer aids, including incense burners, rosaries and masks. I wonder about the parallel with Catholic rosaries, censers and so forth and the similarity of the paintings to the medieval art of Europe. The Tibetan equivalent of purgatory and hell has people with a bird's head and distorted bodies just like the ones Bosch painted.

Back at the hotel David and I ask for a beer but Wednesday is a dry day so we have tea. I've been thinking about the people we saw in India whose tomorrow is exactly the same as their today except for events over which they have no influence. They look resigned but not happy. It strikes me they're in the state many Westerners make great efforts to achieve, no longer striving, but they have made no effort to get there. David says the end result only looks the same. I try to decide if the difference between passivity and abnegation of desire is important. We end up agreeing that willpower is very important but can't justify that belief.

When we meet Kishore for dinner, we learn why our trek to North Sikkim was too expensive. We'd have needed at least twenty porters because they will carry only twenty kilos - the Yoksum ones will carry forty-four - and we'd have had to pay them whether or not the trek took place. Snow can last through the year in the north and make trekking impossible.

### **April 17 (Gangtok -> Yoksum)**

We're in Yoksum after driving over five hours at an average of barely 25 kilometers per hour in an Indian-made jeep configured for 10 people. We bought two seats each. The road is just over one lane wide and Jeeps can pass in opposite directions in most places if one stops. The road to Gangtok was the same. Road signs warned *"Drive like hell and you'll get there"*. The road is cut out of the hillside and constantly climbs or drops. There'd been many landslides, sometimes from above. Other times the road collapses because water builds up behind a boulder and pushes it out of the hillside. Beside the road women broke stone into gravel with hammers beside log fires covered with corrugated iron heating gravel and pitch.



Signs on building walls exhort us to *"Vote Umbrella"*. They're umbrella not words because illiteracy is so widespread. All the political parties have such symbols. At the medical center there is a written sign, though. It says, *"Leprosy is caused by a germ. It can be treated. It is not caused by sin"*.



Our evening meal is cooked by our crew, a huge bowl of noodle soup, giant bowls of rice, okra and mixed vegetables, a chicken leg and dhal, followed by a gelatinous dessert whose ingredients we couldn't identify, cooked apples and bananas, nuts and raisins. It would have been far too much even if we'd trekked all day. Most of the locals are five feet tall or less and I suddenly see how invading sailors could have led to legends of giants in Europe. Perhaps our crew thinks we have the appetite of giants.

### **April 18 (Yoksum)**

Cocks are crowing when I wake at 4 and a cuckoo joins them in greeting the day. Kabru is brilliantly white at first light above the still dark tree-covered hills and I have a powerful urge to get closer. At last I see why people worship mountains. Then I stumble across the hot water secret. The faucet under the water heater is only on in the very middle. It's off both clockwise and anti, and the position of the other four faucets is unimportant. The WC defeats me only for a moment. Its inflow faucet is turned off.



After breakfast we walk to the river down a very steep path through the cardomoms whose value, our guide says, varies inversely with the price of gold. We pass a Lepcha homestead with corn growing on terraces, two cattle in a bamboo shelter eating ferns, and hens in a bamboo cage like an English rabbit hutch. Many families keep a pig in a similar hutch. A beautiful pink orchid is growing in a tree by the river. We hitch a ride back in a Coop Society jeep whose driver says he thought we were with the Coop. He and his passengers are simply curious about us, and friendly.

David and I later visit the monastery, which was founded in 1701 and is the oldest in Sikkim. We pass water-powered prayer wheels along the way that were made long ago by Lepchas. They'll continue to get the benefit of the prayers for as long as the wheels turn. Empty rum bottles lie

around the two monastery buildings but we don't discover whether rum has a ritual purpose or if the monks just like it. They do like chang, our guide says, and drink it with abandon, so David and I try some when we return to the hotel. A tall wooden vessel is filled with fermented millet, you add hot water and drink it with a straw. It tastes rather like saki.

### **April 19 (Yoksum -> Bakkim)**

We set off at 8am up the trail out of Yoksum, which was first made for yaks going to summer pastures, then became a trade route and is now maintained by the Park Service. When we meet other people they ask where we came from and after a few wrong answers I realize the appropriate answer isn't America but Yoksum. We pass a couple of dzo trains. They're a cross between yaks and buffaloes and can live at lower altitudes than a yak. They're also more tractable. Nevertheless, you must always make them pass on the outside of the trail because if they get the chance, they might nod you over the edge for a joke.



It's 65 degrees F and the clouds are five hundred feet above us when we stop for a three-hour lunch at 7,000 feet. There's a problem with the stove and one porter couldn't carry his load so our guide had to go back and help. John says it usually takes the crew a couple of days to get organized, then lunch will take less than an hour, just enough time for the porters to rest, and the cook will arrive at the day's destination before we do.

We meet trekkers coming down and our guide, Pranai, which means "love", talks to theirs. They had to turn back because the snow was impassable and one of their porters got snow blindness, but the trail will be OK now, they say. Our porters are mostly boys in their late teens. John says porters in Sikkim aren't well trained because there isn't much trekking so most of them only get one trek a year and they have to stop by the time they're in their late 20s because although they're strong, they don't have good long term health.





After a very steep climb at the end of the day we stop at Bakkim in the clouds at about 8,500 feet. There's just one farm here and a large tourist hut. Pranai arranges for us to have tea at the farm, a two-room structure with a kitchen at one end. Sticks are pushed in the front of a concrete stove in the center of one wall and handle-less saucepans are set on four or five holes in a flat surface above the fire. The ceiling is shiny black from smoke that drifts out of gaps at the end of the roof peak but it doesn't feel smoky. Something is cooking in the center of the stove and water is periodically ladled into it from an outer pan. There are low wooden platforms covered with carpets round the other sides of the room, six inches high in front of the open window and opposite the stove, and two feet high opposite the window. The high platform is both a seat and a table.



The Tibetan farm wife is wearing traditional clothes including felt boots. Pranai chats with one of her sons and is told about an obstinate German trekker who got altitude sickness but refused to turn back. The crew carried him very quickly lower when he became unconscious but he died.

This tourist hut has two stories and could probably accommodate a hundred people. Such huts were built all over India for English officials who traveled around the country with large retinues.



## **April 20 (Bakkim -> Phedang)**

Today is Sidwell Day, the day I discovered America. It's very overcast when we set off at 8am, there's thunder and lightning in the distance, it's quite cold at 45F and there's a stiff breeze. Yesterday was up and down along a well-defined hillside track but today we climb straight up a much rougher trail. We pass spectacular rhododendron trees and bushes with dark red flowers. The snow only melted a couple of days ago and there's still some left under the trees. Pranai asks a guide going in the opposite direction about the trail from Uttare, where we were going to start. It's still impassable, which is why we're going in the opposite direction from John's original plan. We pass a large rock, which Pranai tells us is believed to have magic properties. If you rub your neck on it three times, you will not get mountain sickness. David and I seize the opportunity.

When we reach Phedang at 11,665 feet, it's 55F and the sun is shining brightly. The snow-covered mountains look quite close. We spend the afternoon acclimating to the altitude. Pandim is visible at first but then clouds blow in, low ones from the east, high ones from the west and still more from the south. The temperature is very variable. I read about Sikkim and feel slightly out of breath as well as more tired than I expected. David alternates between reading Annie Dillard and gazing at the mountains. John lies in his tent thinking. There was snow yesterday where we're going tomorrow. As night falls, the crew makes an illegal but very welcome fire in a well-used fireplace that's sheltered by a tree stump.





### **April 21 (Phedang -> Kokchurong)**

The night is clear with bright moonlight, spectacular stars and complete quiet. Early morning sun soon burns off the frost but then clouds come and we walk through cloud almost all morning up the eastern ridge of the Prek Chu valley. Most of the rhododendrons here are 25 feet tall or less and moss grows on all sides of them so it must usually be wet. We pass a small pile of rocks and two staves with prayer flags that was made as a memorial to the German where he died.



Our Camp at Kokchurong



We stop at Kokchurong because it begins to hail that turns to heavy rain, then snow, which continues until the evening. Also, there are two or three other parties ahead of us that will stay at our original destination, so there'd be no kitchen space for our crew. This is a good dry hut about 50 yards from the Prek Chu, which is about 15 feet wide now but rushes through a well scoured channel that's over 100 feet wide. It must be quite something in the monsoon.



A dzo train arrives with another trekking party's gear and a porter comes down the trail long after them with two huge sacks of hay, the only kind they can survive on. They eat every scrap of twig outside the hut while they wait. They look even more contemplative than cows, mildly curious, but very still. Pranai asks if I'm enjoying the trek. *"It's wonderful!"* I say, *"everything I hoped it would be."* "Yes" he replies, *"I could tell from your face."*

## **April 22 (Kokchurong -> Simiti)**

John falls in the river right after we start this morning and I'm a couple of seconds too slow to get a photo of the airborne part. *"You just can't get the help these days"* he complains. It's a magnificent hike up the Prek Chu valley with fine views of Pandim and even the shoulder of Kanchenjunga at first, but then the clouds came. The valley floor is relatively flat. Its western side is very steep but the slope is less on the east side where boulders fall to the valley floor. There are rhododendrons 12 or 15 feet high at first and some firs but only dwarf rhododendrons above 12,500 feet. We attempt lunch at Onglaktang but there's a problem with the stove so we go on to Simiti, where the hut is confusingly labeled Sungmoteng. We're now at 13,500 feet at the head of the valley in a plain a few hundred feet wide with a lake at the apex, which David and I respectfully circumnavigate clockwise, the same procedure I later recall, as when passing the port round the dinner table. Dust gives the lake a hard mud border and a turquoise color. Two plump orange geese swim out to the ice on the shaded half, hoot melodically and walk across to the pass. John says they fly over Everest to breed. On the far shore are yaks, which unlike dzoes have a long pelt below the belly and horns pointing backwards instead of forwards.





Prek Chu Valley



Onglaktang





Simiti



Ilana's reaction to David's journal of previous trips had been, *"It's all facts! There's nothing about how you feel!"* so he's attempting to do better this time. Annie Dillard is also having an effect. On the trail this morning he told me we are watching the water's wheel of life. The snow melts, flows



down the mountain and soaks into the plain, becomes vapor under the sun's rays and joins a cloud, then returns to the mountain to be deposited again as snow. If it's lucky, it's deposited on a glacier and fulfills its destiny.

The night sky is very bright up here. There's no light pollution, less air for the starlight to pass through, and the air is cleaner. This place feels like an amphitheater with one open side. The other sides are very dark, surmounted by brilliant white ranges of mountain peaks, above which is the black, star-filled sky. The crew lights a small fire and roasts John's boots which are still wet from his fall in the river, as well as their own boots, including rubber ones. One sings what we think must be the Ballad of the Roasted Boot.

### **April 23 (Simiti -> Goecha La -> Chematung)**

Mornings always start with tremendous coughing, throat clearing and loud spitting by the crew. This dawn chorus usually continues intensely for half an hour, then sporadically for up to another hour. The crew spent last night huddled against a large rock under a partial roof of rusty corrugated iron. The sun heats the rock during the day and the stored heat is released slowly through the night but the temperature last night was only 35F and it felt much colder so today's chorus is exceptionally long and loud.



Two naks, female yaks, each with a calf, are heading for the lake at first light as I stare up at Pandim. The closer we get, the taller and steeper it grows. John thinks it's only been climbed once. It's a stiff climb along the side of the glacier up towards Goecha La and my heart pounds from lack of oxygen. The glacier floor is a river of gray rocks and the only sound is more rocks tumbling down.



We pass two stone circles on a rare flat area. The stones are arranged to represent the mountains so they will protect shepherds who sleep here during the season. Then we very slowly descend a steep moraine so slippery that steps must be cut in it for the porters.







The clouds catch up with us after a sunny, hot morning but we get a fine view of Kanchenjunga for half an hour when we reach Goecha La at 15,365 feet and we see several avalanches. The highest of Kanchenjunga's five peaks is 28,146 feet above sea level. Legends say it is the 'eternal snow' treasure chest with each peak holding one of the five treasures: gold, silver, precious stones, corn and sacred books. Tibetans say the god of wealth lives there but the Lepchas believe it is an earthly manifestation of their God and protector. The snow is quite deep up here and Pranai goes to inspect the far side of the moraine ridge separating us from the Talung Glacier to see if it's passable. He says the snow has drifted too deeply for porters to get through, so we descend for the night to Chematung, a sheltered flat area at 14,500 feet, where there's water. It's easy to walk on this well-packed snow except near boulders where you're apt to sink to waist level because rocks heat in the sun and melt the surrounding snow.

#### **Apr 24 (Chematung -> Kokchurong)**

The wind came up from the southeast last night and it felt colder than the 35F thermometer reading. I felt short of breath and had trouble sleeping but I'm fine this morning, another magnificently sunny one with a splendid view of Goecha mountain. A housefly is showing interest in my breakfast. There are very few insects here apart from bees among the rhododendrons.

We decide to go back to Kokchurong, where we were snowed in, and then try the Rathong area. Pranai is looking sick when we set off but says it's only a gastric ulcer and he looks well again by midday. His granny told him he'd get sick on this trek. He doesn't believe in god but his granny prays all the time and can foretell the future. We stop for lunch at Simiti by the turquoise lake and I watch four yaks browsing the algae. Turquoise is holy to Tibetans so any turquoise lake tends to be declared holy. Overlooking this one is a huge boulder resting on two others with a stone wall in front for shelter and an offering of juniper on the wall. Simiti was snowed in one winter and there was no food for the yaks. They gathered by the wall to die and many bones still lie around.

The steep moraine cliff is easier to climb than it was to descend. Climbing always is easier but also the snow has melted now. It continues sunny as we descend and we get clear views of



Kanchenjunga. I do wish I could convey more of the feeling the mountains inspire. Their immensity and the starkness of contrast between rock and snow have no parallel in life as we usually know it and their appearance constantly changes as the sun moves. It feels as though everything revolves round them, including the sun. As the light changes direction and intensity, previously obscured fault lines become starkly visible. Snow packs into clefts so steep it seems impossible it could settle. The glaciers are constantly being fed by tumbling rocks. It seems nothing could but every living creature would want to live here on the glacial moraine where dwarf juniper is so delightfully fragrant in the sun.

Rhododendrons reappear and primulas are emerging to flower next month when we reach 13,000 feet. We continue down the U-shaped valley that's perfect for blue sheep because there's water, vegetation, and an escape route up the mountain, but no sheep are visible. Back at Kokchurong the oxygen content feels normal again. At higher altitudes, it was as if the crew had burned most of the oxygen with their beloved wood fires.

### **Apr 25 (Kokchurong -> Dzongri)**

It's a steep climb to Dzongri that takes us four hours. Douglas Freshfield was captivated by it in 1899 and wrote, *"it is, I believe, destined in future, though perhaps far off, years to become the mountaineers' headquarters, the Riffel Alp or Eggishorn of Sikkim. A broad pasturage just above the forest level, commanding extensive views of the snows on one hand and the foothills on the other, within a half day's march – when the paths have been made good – of the Kabru and Pandim Glaciers, affording charming strolls or 'ladies' walks' in three directions, having at hand a convenient Riffelhorn in the 15,780 foot Kabur, the black rock conspicuous even from Darjiling against the snows, it needs nothing but the extension and repair of bridle-roads from Sandakphu and Pamionchi to make it the inevitable excursion for the more adventurous tourist."*





The same yak-herder's stone huts Freshfield saw a century ago are still the only structures on this "broad pasturage" but there is now also a trekkers' hut round the mountain to the east. Freshfield's prophecy hasn't been fulfilled but there are several other groups here that include two most disreputable looking porters among otherwise normal crews.



There's thick cloud when we arrive so we decide to get up at 4:30 to climb Dzongri for the sunrise. Tomorrow will be a free day for the crew except two who will go for more supplies. I spend the afternoon observing clouds sweeping up and down the valley, milling about as if they had no purpose. It is cold and then blazing hot moments apart. The sun shines brightly then a gray cloud drifts down and the sun is first turned silver like the moon then becomes invisible. I sit on the porch of the old trekkers' hut, which has elegant paneled doors set in patchwork walls.

David joins me. He's been thinking about the similarity between religious practices here and among the Hopi Indians. Both make round structures for worship that you must walk round clockwise, both hold turquoise in great esteem, both prohibit pointing with one finger, and both believe there are spirits everywhere.

A cuckoo is calling late in the evening. John looks it up in his bird book because we're surprised to hear one at this altitude. The book says 4,000 meters is their maximum range and we're at 3,950.

## **April 26 (Dzongri)**

There were great thunderstorms to the NE and SW last night with huge lightning flashes. Dense cloud covers the sky at 4 so we wait. It's partly clear at 5:30, so we set off. Both John and I have trouble breathing at first. Your breathing is shallower when you're asleep and sometimes the lungs can't extract enough oxygen when you first get moving. A quarter of the way up to the Dzongri peak, clouds are already rolling in but we get a good view of Kanchenjunga and see more of its peaks because we're looking from a different direction. Only one was visible from Goecha



La. We also see Pandim, Kabru, Rathong, Frey's Peak and the Kang La, the pass on the old trade route to Nepal, as well as the hanging valley that Freshfield noted on the other side of the Rathong Chu. That valley was once at the same level as the Rathong's but the Rathong Chu's massive flow cut its bed much deeper and now the hanging valley ends with a waterfall. The clouds are coming up fast now so we decide to stop and try again tomorrow.

The weather here is heavily influenced by weather in Tibet. When it's sunny on the Tibetan plain, the air is heated, rises, and draws air up over the Himalayas from the south. There's hardly any grass at the hut not because of weather but because the pack animals ate it all. Three horses are raiding the "biodegradable waste" right now even though it's only plastic bottles and cans. If there ever was biodegradable waste, other pack animals got it first.

It stays misty so after breakfast we go to look at the chortens, meaning 'receptacle for offerings', on top of a ridge we passed yesterday. I have great trouble getting enough oxygen. One's reaction to altitude can vary greatly from day to day and even if you haven't suffered from altitude sickness before, you may in future. My best solution is to breathe as deeply as I can at a steady rate but even then I can't climb more than twenty paces without stopping to get my heart rate back to normal. Adult yaks are foraging and their calves are scampering about over the pasturage as we pass by. There's a ruined monastery just downhill from the chortens, oriented so that as you face the altar you're looking due east and towards either Nilgri or the spring equinox sunrise. It's too derelict to be certain which was intended. The four chortens directly face Kanchenjunga.



## **April 27 (Dzongri -> Bikbari)**

We set off up Dzongri once again despite the completely overcast sky and are on the peak at 5am. Pranai lights an offering of juniper twigs in the fireplace among the prayer flags, waits for a while and then returns to the campsite. We continue to wait and individual clouds begin to separate



out, some above, some below and a few at our level. The sky slowly clears and for ten minutes, there's a clear and magnificent view in every direction.

Back at the hut, Pranai is in the middle of great activity with the porters when we return. He sent two porters to Tshoka yesterday to buy rice and other supplies but they took the money and didn't return. Pranai has replaced them with a porter who was on his way back to Yoksum and a guide who was returning from Goecha La and now all the loads have to be redistributed.

We begin the steep climb to the Dzongri La at 8am through a continuous drizzle. I breathe deeply at a rate that would cause hyperventilation at lower altitudes and feel normal again. There is some snow on the 13,265 foot Dzongri La but much less than on the Goecha La. It's a gentle descent to a bridge over the Rathong Chu, then the trail turns back to a yak herders' hut at Bikbari that has one room with a wooden floor and one bare. The crew get a fire going on the bare floor where they'll sleep and we retreat to our tents. I dry my clothes with body heat for a while but it's only 50F so I got into my sleeping bag to get warm and read Marco Pallis' "Sikkim". When tea and biscuits come David tells me what a fine place this is now you can see it, but in the few moments I take to get dressed the rain returns and within five minutes we're misted in again.

The east side of the Rathong valley is steep and covered with dwarf rhododendron but the west side looks almost vertical. David and I are wondering if we dare to cross the rickety bridge over the Rathong Chu, which consists of just two small logs precariously balanced on boulders, when a porter appears on the opposite bank with a five-gallon container of kerosene. He has a new hat and a tremendous smile as he springs across the bridge. It's one of the missing porters, completely transformed from the retiring person who used to carry my bag. After dinner, David asks Pranai if the porter offered any explanation. "*No*" says Pranai, "*I'll ask him later.*" No US manager would accept the guy back as if nothing had happened. It's different here.

Another difference is that people here nod their head sideways to signal agreement, not vertically. It's a graceful gesture, which Kishore and Pranai use frequently with John, our trek leader, but also with David and me and among themselves.

## **April 28 (Bikbari -> Tipik Chu)**

Dense mist with intermittent light rain turns to steady rain then snow. We're undecided about trying to get to Tipik Chu but when the snow stops, Pranai says the porters want to go so we set off up the west side of the valley, which turns out not to be vertical but is very high and steep. Snow begins to fall lightly again. On the far side of the ridge Pranai leads us down into the valley although John thinks we should continue along the ridge. When we get down into the valley we find the crew by a huge boulder against which they've lit a fire. After a while, Pranai says we've come the wrong way. The porter who returned yesterday says he knows this area well and can get us back on the right trail (it turns out he didn't have a new hat, just a huge smile, because he'd met some old friends, they'd had some chang, and one thing led to another). Pranai goes with him to check the route while the rest of us eat then returns to show us the way.

We make an extremely steep climb to 14,165 feet where we discover the trail down has been destroyed by a landslide. The porters search for an alternative. There's now heavy mist but no rain or snow. One of the porters finds an extremely steep and unstable descending trail, a true knee-wobbler, then we have another steep climb out of that valley. The clouds part briefly at the next ridge and we see the trail we just followed. It looks impossible. Finally there's a shallow



descent into the hanging valley we saw from Dzongri, and we arrive at a yak herder's hut. John says if we get up before the crew starts making noise and go further up the valley, we have a good chance of seeing blue sheep.



### **April 29 (Tipik Chu -> Kokchurong)**

It's 30F and clear at 5am when we go looking for blue sheep. There's no sign of movement but we do find hoof-prints and scat. After breakfast we start what Pranai says will be an easy four hour trek to Boktok, just a trip round a spur into the next valley.





We climb steeply, traverse long stretches of deep snow to get across two valleys we aren't expecting and stop for lunch at a yak herder's hut. It has three stone walls and one of thin wood planks at its east end. Then we struggle across another very steep valley followed by a smaller one and arrive at what Pranai claims is Boktok. John is not convinced. There's no water here, anyway, so we have to go on. We cross a ridge with several old places of worship, including one with a stone-lined fire pit and walls made of flat stones set vertically, see our first primulas in bloom, purple ones, and several yellow rhododendrons, and at last arrive at another very deep valley. This one has a substantial river so we can camp. Pranai's "easy trek" turned out to be an eight-hour slog through light snow for the first three hours, then rain. Either the map is wrong or we took a wrong turn and we're not sure where we are now, but it's very pretty.

I ask John if it's as odd as it seems that Pranai doesn't know where we are and he tells me it's not unusual, especially when you go off the beaten track. The guide's main job is to communicate with the trekkers. He has to speak English but he won't necessarily know the route. You have to hope one of the porters or the cook has been to the area before. Cooks tend to be more experienced than guides so they often do know the way. They're always in great demand and must be booked at least two months in advance.

There's spectacular lightning and long booms of thunder as evening closes in and it starts to snow. After dinner I find my tent collapsed under the snow. We right it and I feel relieved when the snow stops half an hour later.

### **April 30 (Kokchurong)**

The valley is filled with cloud when I wake, there's bright sun an hour later when my morning tea is delivered and the cloud is back when washing water comes half an hour later. After breakfast it's sunny again but today is a rest day for the porters so it won't matter even if snow comes next.

We decide to explore and see if the upper valley is open and flat as it should be if we're at Kokchurong, the most likely place on John's map. A few minutes after we set out, we meet one of the porters sitting by the stream. He gets up as we approach and starts climbing the hillside. He speaks no English so we can't be sure but it looks like he's here to guide us, so we follow. It begins to snow. We reach a place where John can take pictures but the upper valley isn't yet visible so I continue up the very steep edge of a large landslide. Pranai's "Boktok" hut is just a few yards in front of us at the summit and I shelter there with the porter and watch the snow until David arrives. He says John made the better decision and went back to the camp. There shouldn't be snow here in early spring.

Our descent to the campsite is easier today but we've made no real progress working out where we are because visibility is so poor today, so we decide to stay another day, get up early and try again to get far enough up the valley to see the pass into Nepal that should be there.

### **May 1 (Kokchurong)**

I wake at 3:15 to the sound of the cook chopping wood for the breakfast fire and enjoy my sleeping bag until 4. Breakfast is scheduled for 4:30 so we can be up the mountain before the clouds but I'm ready early so I sit by the fire and watch the cook and his helpers make chapattis. They're cooked in a dry frying pan, placed on the embers to puff up, turned several times and then patted flat.



We set off at 5:15 on the very steep climb. It takes half an hour to get my deep breathing going dependably and I feel exhausted. It's sunny and clear as we climb and pass the Boktok hut. Far in the distance up the side of the valley I see what looks like a CIA drone. It's a lammergeyer. It



glides past 50 feet above us on its ten-foot wings and beats them just once when it's far down the valley. Neither John nor Pranai has seen one in Sikkim before and I'm thrilled. There were lammergeyers in the Alps until the 1860s when the last one seen was shot.

Three hours later we reach a place where we can see the pass. It's still covered with deep snow. John takes photographs, GPS coordinates and compass bearings so he can confirm the location on a map of the Nepal side. Maps of Nepal are detailed and accurate, but there's no good map of this part of Sikkim. The best one available, except to the military, I assume, is Swiss and although they didn't survey the whole country it's all shown at the same detail. The unsurveyed parts were interpolated so the whole map is plausible but not always right.

Gray clouds are now coming fast up the valley. There should be a lake round the corner from where we are, but the clouds would get there before we can find out, so we start back. It begins to snow. We can still see the trail but not much else. It's late morning when we get back to the camp. We sit by the fire for a while and go to our tents when the snow turns to heavy rain. The monsoon seems to be coming early this year and tomorrow's trek will be a beast, straight up a steep mountain into the snow.

I spend most of the afternoon by the fire with the crew, watching a couple of porters carve cooking whisks. They find a pine branch with four small branches at right angles to it, cut the small branches an inch long, make the main piece a foot long, and scrape off all the bark. You work the whisk by holding the shaft between your palms and rotating it in opposite directions. Some of the other porters made walking sticks and an ice axe for tomorrow. When David joined me, Dawa made us popcorn and coffee, frothed with one of the new whisks.



Later in the afternoon there was a ceremony to bless our prayer flags. One of the porters is a monk who wanted to try portering on his vacation. Pranai says it hasn't met his hopes because monks are used to being looked after, not hard work. But the monk is a nice guy and Pranai has asked him to bless our flags because, *"today is a good day for praying"*. The monk carefully examines the rolled up flags and sets them on a serving platter with a little heap of rice and a cup of water on top of which is a sprig of dwarf rhododendron with some leaves immersed.

The blessing is a low, fast chant punctuated by taking the sprig out of the water and shaking a few drops of water onto the flags and a few into the air. The monk does this a dozen times and the same with the rice a couple of times, too. Once, he takes a few grains in his hand and twines both hands together with some fingers pointing upwards. Several of the crew exchange comments during the blessing and the monk smiles. We're all sitting round the fire and it's very romantic in a characteristically casual way, which David characterizes as respectful but not reverent. When the chant ends, Pranai says it's customary to put ten or twenty rupees on the plate, so David goes to get a suitable note and the monk does another brief chant, during which one of the porters puts a note on the plate. Then the monk hands me the flags and remaining rice, which Pranai says we'll need tomorrow.

When we're sitting by the fire after dinner Pranai tells me if you keep moving round the fire to avoid smoke and the smoke keeps following you, it's because you've been peeing indiscriminately round the campsite instead of always in the same place. I wish he'd told me before.

## **May 2 (Kokchurong -> Yampung)**

Last night's plan was that we'd breakfast at 6 and leave at 6:30. Pranai, Dawa the cook and one of the porters would leave earlier than that to start making steps in the snow for the rest of us. As John predicted, we don't in fact set off until after 8. We climb from 12,000 feet to 14,200 up a very steep trail covered with snow. As we prepare to move on from the first rest stop, Dawa the cook says to the monk *"Let's go, lama!"*





There are three prayer flagpoles at the pass. The monk strings our flags between them and gives David and me some rice grains. We chant and toss the rice towards one of the poles then the lama gives each of us a small coin and signals that we should go with him to the central stone chorten. He prays, places the coin between the stones, puts his hands together under his chin and bows to the chorten. We do the same.

Our route down the other side of the pass is across gently sloping snow with a few steep places. Visibility is fifty feet through snow and then rain. We stop on an island of rocks when the porter who knows the way gets lost and Dawa fires up the primus to make tea. Visibility is so bad in this driving rain that even if we can find our planned route it'll be too dangerous. We might not notice the lake we'd have to pass until we were out on the weak ice, so we go a different route on which we keep losing the trail and reach Yampung at 5, high in a pine forest at 11,000 feet. There's just a primitive farmhouse here and two barns, in one of which the crew will sleep tonight. There's a splendid view of the mountains southwest of here.



Pranai arranges very refreshing salt tea in the farmhouse. The family lives in one room and yak calves sleep in the other. The adult yaks stay outside and the chickens spend their nights under a tarpaulin in the living room. The living room has an earth floor with a central fire surrounded by planks set on stones. Eight sacks of flour are covered by a tarp in one corner but it's too dark to see much else. There are no windows; the plank walls and roof have gaps for ventilation and visibility. Fierce Tibetan mastiffs are chained to each end of the house for protection.

The family includes a mother and two daughters of about 8 and 12, both very shy, and a son who's away at school. Pranai tries to persuade the girls to go to school, too. There's no sign of the farmer. It's very isolated and they rarely see anyone else except when they go two or three times a year to trade their yak cheese, butter and wool at a market twelve hours away. The cheese is shiny and hard as a piece of rock. Now I understand fairy tales about cheese that young men pretend is a stone. They crush it to fool giants into thinking they're extraordinarily strong. Pranai gives the woman money for the tea, medicine "for emergencies" and a battery for her radio. She has a radio and a clock, but unlike the farm where we had tea in Billing, no electricity.



### May 3 (Yampung -> Rombik Chu)

I take pictures of the farmhouse at first light as well as the yak with a white stripe and bushy white tail, which Pranai says is rare and valuable. Sikhs in Punjab prize white yak wool for their turbans. The only sounds are birds singing, yak bells dongling, their occasional loud grunts, and the trill of the little stream. Yak grunting is just like a big old John Deere tractor trying to start. They do a lot of it first thing in the morning.





Today's is the longest, steepest, slipperiest trail yet, a most precipitous and boulderous knee-wobbler. By one o'clock we've already descended more than 4,000 feet and I'm thinking the yak that first made this trail must have been a beast of uncommon obstinacy. Perhaps it had the mountaineering gene, or maybe it wanted something extraordinary to bullshit about with other yaks. We pass through large areas yak farmers have cleared for pasture by burning the bases of trees and letting them fall; felling live trees is illegal.

We camp above the Rimbik Chu at 6,680 feet, where the mother-in-law of one of our porters makes tea for us in her tiny bamboo wattle and daub house surrounded by terraces growing potatoes, corn, peas, and "iskus", a kind of squash. She wears a Sherpa married woman's waist buckle. It's damp here, damp enough for orchids in the trees, but none of the huts has water. One wall of this house is almost entirely filled with a door and the other by a fire on a raised part of the earth floor. Another wall has two beds end to end and the fourth has a cooking area the same height as the beds. After the tea we rest in a two-room house next door while the porters sing and crash metal crockery in the other room. I notice the porter whose hat I thought had Tibetan symbols round the band in fact says in an unusual font, "sea horse sea horse sea horse".

Sikkimese men often hold hands affectionately. Pranai often links arms with me or puts his arm across my shoulders at the end of a long day. The porters sit by the fire in the evening with arms round each other's shoulders or hands on each other's knees and they share a blanket when they sleep. Sikkimese people like to be much closer than Westerners and don't need personal space. On a difficult trail, Pranai or the other guide follow us barely half a pace behind. It feels like they're trying to say, "*Hurry up, you idiot!*" but they just want to keep us safe.

## **May 4 (Rimbik Chu -> Darap)**

Because we couldn't follow our planned route yesterday, we can't now get to the Singalila ridge. No more high altitudes for us. We set off for Darap and cross a bridge made of two bamboo poles with ropes that support a third pole you walk across.





There's a terraced farm on the other side of the valley that slid into the river because trees whose roots used to anchor the soil were burned off. We stop for lunch beside a river where twenty Limbu women and children are bathing and washing clothes under a derelict metal suspension bridge. Beside it there's a usable replacement made of tree trunks.



We reach Darap late in the afternoon after two more swimming stops for the crew. It's a town with an asphalt road and a school. It looks like a medieval village in England because the central area is made up of many little strips of land. About twenty houses are visible and others may be lurking out of sight. A dozen small children and a number of adults come to inspect us immediately we arrive and stay for several hours. Sea Horse, who lives in this area and carries my bag, arrives long after everyone else with a huge smile and aroma of chang. Since he'd gone awol once before, I was starting to become concerned.





We usually have our evening meal at around 7 although after a very long trek it might be as late as 8:30. Because this has been a short day we're ready at 6:30 but there's no sign of the crew; they're all inside a nearby hut. Lights come on in the houses while we sit worrying about our food and we realize the town extends far up the hillside. Every so often a jeep drives slowly past, filled with singing, clapping people, even some on its roof. There must be a change up the hill. We wonder if each jeep holds a cricket team? By 8, we're running out of topics interesting enough to overcome our hunger, by 8:30 we're reduced to feeble jokes about what the crew could be doing in a locked hut with a roaring primus, at 9 we're asleep sitting up, at 9:30 we're so stiff we have to stand up, and by 10 our balance is gone and we're tottering. Then we have a really bad moment; porters take our table and chairs away. Do they think we've already eaten?

Moments later we're led into the hut and find a feast laid out before us. There's mushroom soup, steamed spring rolls, pineapple rings, splendid thick potato chips, sardines, a mushroom and soy dish, rice, hot dogs, an exceedingly rich cake whose identifiable ingredients include chocolate, corn flakes, nuts, pineapple, wild strawberries and condensed milk. Pranai is especially pleased by our enthusiasm for the cake because he's its maker.

I wake at 3 to a chorus of dogs barking, at 4 to Hindi singing from the orphanage next door, and for the third time at 5 to the sound of the primus roaring and the crew chattering. I'm drenched with sweat and figure it must already be very hot outside, but it's deliciously cool when I investigate. I must be sweating from the effort of digestion.

### **May 5 (Darap -> Pelling)**

It's an easy six-kilometer walk along the road to Pelling where we check into the Hotel Kabru, which is owned by one of Kishore's many cousins. After a problematic shower, the power keeps flickering off, we visit Pemayantse Monastery, where an 8–10 day long chant for peace and harmony in the world is in progress and many of the faithful are present. The head lama, who is a rinpoche, a reincarnation of a famous lama, and a second rinpoche are leading the chant. We make a donation and enjoy a cup of sweet tea in return.





Pemayantse is by far the finest monastery I've seen. The main building has three stories with traditional artwork on the ground floor, Chinese style artwork on the second, and an immense three-dimensional mandala, an aid to concentration, on the third. You're supposed to be able to keep your entire mandala in your mind when meditating. This one is 10-12 feet high, 8-10 feet along each side, and very intricate. It was made in the twentieth century by a monk and took sixty years to complete. There's also a 10-15 feet diameter prayer wheel in a separate building.



We meet Kishore back at the hotel and he takes us for coffee where we meet a Swiss woman doctor who recently came here to work. She worked in a Quaker farmhouse in the English Lake District a few years earlier and realized how much her English had improved when, after two months, she'd progressed from bewilderment to hysterical laughter at *Fawlty Towers*.

Over dinner Kishore explains his business strategy. He aims at Europeans because they're willing to pay for a premium service he can be confident of providing dependably at a profit. He avoids Indians because they won't pay enough and complain about everything, and the Japanese because they're impossible to satisfy on an inherently unpredictable trek. He doesn't try for Americans because too many of us are afraid of getting sick in India and our vacations are too short.

### **May 6 (Pelling -> Darjeeling)**

I'm woken at 4am by the man in the next room throwing up with loud, mournful abandon and try to console myself with a shower but there's only a trickle of hot water and no towel or soap. There's also no toilet paper. David says this has expanded his concept of what a hotel can be.

The drive from Pelling to Darjeeling takes us four hours. We go four miles as the crow flies in the first hour, descending from Pelling's 5,400 feet to the River Teesta at 1,000 feet then make faster



progress along a very windy road until we have to regain all that altitude to reach Darjeeling, a big, crowded, noisy town thronged with beggars. Our taxi is boarded by one of the taxi mafia who thwart drivers from outside town and he misdirects ours, but John knows the way and eventually our driver goes where he directs.

The Belleview is an old-fashioned hotel with suites of huge rooms and splendid wood paneling and furniture. My living room has a fine writing table, a splendid chest of drawers made of two traveling chests and many other fine pieces, there's a most elegant bed and other furniture as well as an imposing array of fitted closets in my bedroom, and I have a gigantic bathroom with hot water!

John checks email and discovers the Chinese have closed Tibet's borders, allegedly to control the spread of SARS. Our first thought is to see if we can go to Mustang instead, but it would take too long. David gets through to Ilana by phone later and she says she discovered about Tibet while en route and has already investigated several trekking firms about alternatives. She also tells David that Felicity called while we were in Sikkim and asked me to call home. I do and learn that my Dad died in his sleep the night I flew to Heathrow.

## **May 7 (Darjeeling)**

We visit the Himalayan Mountain Institute and inspect a map of all the routes up Everest, equipment from historic climbs, old photos, and a big display of John's photographs. Mountaineers are a batty lot. In the zoo next door there's a snow leopard. I'd imagined them to be smaller because they live at high altitudes where prey is scarce. There are also Siberian Tigers, which are very large and splendid, and two black bears soaking in their pool in the warm sun. I see why the hill stations were so valuable and, as we slowly return to the hotel through the throngs of people I begin to appreciate the vastness of India's population.

I spend the afternoon watching people in Chowrasta Square. Kishore says it's very easy to have enough to live on in India and very difficult to get more. The shop keepers on the streets nearby sit from 5am to after 8pm waiting for occasional customers but I guess it's no more tiring than sitting anywhere else. I'd find it very hard to be so patient but David says he's been surprised by the progress he's made in napping while waiting, e.g., for the bank to open, so perhaps I could learn, too. While I ruminate in the Square, David visits the botanical garden, which he says would have been good if more flowers were out. On the way back up the hill he stumbles on the nice part of town where it's very quiet and there are fine views. Then we watch an exhibition of Nepali folk dance which features four girls who look Siamese moving slowly about the stage clashing cymbals and four men doing likewise beating drums. It continues for a very long time with no variety we can discern until the women walk off to the right and the men to the left. The wind is much colder now and we retreat before the next dance starts.

## **May 8 (Darjeeling -> Kathmandu)**

We leave Darjeeling at 7am for six hours in taxis and the flight from Biratnagar to Kathmandu. Back at the Hotel Garuda we meet Ilana, who has met all kinds of people already, and we discuss what to do next. John's Australian friend recommends going north to Langtang because of the unseasonable weather, but Ilana thinks she's not fit enough. We consider splitting up and doing separate treks but I become distracted by visions of a big breakfast at Mike's tomorrow. One thinks a lot about food on treks.