

## October 2004 Kanchenjunga Trek

This trek was longer and higher than last year, I was fitter, I wasn't sick and it was not my first experience in the mountains so I was less distracted by trying to fit new experiences into existing concepts. I was more alert. Because Maoists controlling the hills condemned America's invasion of Iraq and banned us, I became Austrian.

### Oct 1 (London -> Kathmandu)

Dubai airport is elegant and immaculate and Costa Coffee is a welcome zone of calm at its center. The shopping temple downstairs is filled with expensive jewelry, a BMW is being raffled, and there's a room full of exotic cigars. I'd ignorantly feared my Emirates flight would be without alcohol but the plane was new, plentifully supplied with comforts, the food and liquor was excellent, there was better than average entertainment and the stewardesses were young and cheerful, so much better than British Airways and United who staff long flights with jaded senior people. Granted I got only a couple of hours of low quality sleep on the plane but I'm making real progress with festering. This is a 6-hour layover and I've been entirely content doing nothing. My only activities were consumption of one cup of coffee and a brief inspection of the shopping area.

When we land in Mumbai I learn that my bag is lost. A man representing Royal Nepal Airlines has been told someone from Emirates wants to talk to me but it's evident they don't so he explains I should report the lost bag at Kathmandu. *"Royal Nepal will bring the bag to your hotel,"* he says. *"When might that be?"* *"Tomorrow perhaps. Tomorrow morning if it's in Dubai, or if it's in London it may come tomorrow afternoon."* *"It would come on a Saturday?"* I ask. *"Well, Royal Nepal doesn't fly every day,"* he replies thoughtfully. *"When do they not fly?"* *"They don't fly on Saturdays."*

Then the man goes to get me a boarding pass for Kathmandu, returns for my passport, goes off again and returns ten minutes later with a man who says I must pay \$6. I only have \$100 bills and they go off with one. After fifteen minutes my guide returns alone. *"You're in luck,"* he says, *"they can't change it."* He gives me back my bill and starts to wander off. *"Where should I go now?"* I ask, concerned because my flight is scheduled to leave in five minutes. *"It's landed,"* he says. I continue to look puzzled and he examines my boarding pass. *"I got you a window seat,"* he says, *"it's Gate 14. It's going to land."* Then I hear an announcement in which I recognize 'Kathmandu' and 'Gate 15' and I spot a departures board that says Gate 15 so I follow a large crowd through Security where they demand to inspect my spare batteries.

The rules about batteries keep changing. Sometimes they're allowed in carry-on but not checked bags, sometimes the reverse, sometimes they must be in your camera, GPS and whatnot so you can switch it on, and sometimes they take those batteries away and say you'll get them back, in which case you get random ones jumbled in a big box. I say I have no batteries and proceed to Gate 15, where my flight number is displayed. Thus do we all become criminals. A few minutes later everyone gets up and walks to Gate 14 and we board. Someone is in my seat but that's normal and I'm told to sit one row behind.

Forty minutes later we're parked among the runways. The pilot doesn't speculate about when we'll arrive in Kathmandu but we get there only half an hour late. The woman I'm told to report my lost bag to has trouble believing the bag was lost in London or Dubai

not Mumbai but records the details and says I should call at 8 tomorrow morning. She tells me she's sorry my bag is lost and sounds sincere.

Each stage of my journey was different. The London to Dubai Emirates flight was immaculate but their Dubai to Mumbai flight was not because most of the passengers were Indian. They mobbed the gate the same way as if they were all trying to squeeze into a jeep. There was also a group of English girls with two men climbing over them yelling "*I wuv eooo!!*" The girls were excited by the irritation of the crew trying to serve food. No other nation has comparable courtship behavior and it's not surprising none of the crew wanted to talk about my bag after that flight.

The Mumbai to Kathmandu flight on Royal Nepal had the worst plane and the most noise but because Nepalis are so cheerful it felt good. Finally, it was downright soothing to ride in a van that should have been junked years ago through the cattle in Kathmandu's outskirts, into the crazy throng of Thamel and on to the Hotel Garuda, my home away from home.

I'm intrigued by the list of occupations on the Arrival Card for India: Doctor, Business, Employed, Media, Lawyer, Government, Sports Person, or Other, and the possible purpose of one's visit: Tourism, Business, Transit, Official, Employment, Education, Conference, Social, Medical Treatment, or Other.

This morning's newspaper has an article about someone's youth being 'pockmarked' by erratic school results.

## **Oct 2 (Kathmandu)**

I telephone - my bag is not in Dubai. After breakfast at the Northfield Café, John and I go to Gobardhan's office (he isn't there) and then for a wander. Andrew and Shona's store is thronged with trekkers as usual. It's humid so John goes back to the Garuda's air conditioning while I make a start at Pilgrim's Book. He fetches me later to meet Gobardhan and we finalize arrangements, including refusing once again to take Reshum, our cook on last year's Annapurna trek. John already refused several times by email because we're concerned about potential conflict with the porters. Shiva, our guide on that trek, can't come because he's on another trek, but as long as the new guide can control the porters we'll be fine. I'll eat plentifully before we start, though, just in case. We arrange to meet Gobardhan for lunch on Monday and he'll take us to the airport.

John stays in all afternoon and sleeps. I return to Pilgrim's. I ask an assistant for help locating a book and he's soon suggesting others. His name is Gandhi and he loves books. By the time I go on to Tibet Books I've already bought 47, only half of which I knew I wanted before I met Gandhi. He gives me a restorative cup of tea before I move on and I make a dozen more purchases at Tibet Book. Back at the Garuda I phone again about my lost bag but all I can find out is, "*it's not come yet*". I start a list of what to buy from Andrew and Shona tomorrow.

Over dinner I learn that John didn't go straight from marine diving to the police. He had at least one other intermediate life teaching English in Yugoslavia just before Tito died. He was in an ex-pat community along with his Polish roommate, Stanis. They each spoke three languages fluently but had none in common so they learned Serbo-Croat to communicate. Akio, a Japanese in the group, didn't enjoy food and only ever ate rice. He did like to drink, though, and always progressed from being the life and soul of the

party to silent man with immense smile to fighting drunk. The Chinese mother hen of the group used to wake John saying "*Come quick, Akio is smiling.*"

In the early hours one morning in Paris six years later John was dancing down the Champs Elysees with Helene because she suddenly had to dance, and as they approached a fountain there was a person in full evening dress including a top hat that was a little too big sitting on the fountain edge. He raised his hat as they passed and said, "*Hello Johnny*" with a giant smile. Ever after Helene asked, "*Why didn't you stop?*"

John thinks I should buy one more book, Kim Stanley Robinson's novel about trekking, which he says is very funny. Trekkers are appalled by the third world filth of Kathmandu when they arrive and amazed when they come back after their trek to find how much it was cleaned up while they were gone.

### **Oct 3 (Kathmandu)**

After Mike's Breakfast, which isn't as good as last year, we go to the airport to check on my lost bag. No news, so I start shopping. Andrew and Shona have almost everything and the supermarket pharmacy has most of the rest. Then I go to the New Road with John to find a lens hood for him and a tripod for me. His search fails. Mine ends with the decision to buy a much better one than the one in my lost bag.

All the 2-stroke tuk-tuks are gone, outlawed by the government because "*too many people get sick*". There are still a few powered by propane or electric motor that people have bought using government loans. The first time I woke last night I was dreaming that I'd at last fired my creative but impossible Brazilian programmer, Fernando, and the next morning when John and I were walking around Kathmandu he was working as a porter. The next time I woke I was driving my big old Chevy on the outskirts of Kathmandu. It was smoking like a tuk-tuk and I noticed I'd already driven 100 miles since I last filled it with oil so it was time for another few quarts.

Now after a tasty meal at the Annapurna I've packed my day-pack and everything else is ready to go in my new expedition bag. My day-pack feels heavy, though. There must be things in it I don't have to carry. My only other task for tomorrow is to arrange for Pilgrim's to mail my books home and replace my lost copy of Milton's "*Paradise Lost*".

### **Oct 4 (Kathmandu -> Biratnagar)**

The breakfast steak is much better at the Northfield Café this morning than at Mike's yesterday. As we leave we examine the joint used to make a beam longer for an extension to the dining area that's under construction and try to figure out what kind of wood is being used. The owner comes over and shows us round the hotel next door that he just finished building. We ask if he knows what happened to the Old Vienna because we wanted to eat there last night and it was gone. The Viennese owner died, he says, because he drank too much, and his Nepali partner couldn't keep it going. That's very sad because the Old Vienna had by far the best food in Kathmandu, better than anything in Vienna, in fact.

After breakfast I pack, email and arrange for Pilgrim's to ship my books. Gandhi has found four more for me. I get *Paradise Lost* and also, in case I need a change, *Njal's Saga*. Buried among my junk email is one from Nadia. She's safe, enjoying trying to

introduce gender equality in Afghanistan against immense odds, has already explored widely, and is about to be evacuated to Tajikistan with all the other aid workers until the elections are over. They're viewed by most Afghans as part of an attempt to legitimize a US puppet government.

Gobardhan takes us to lunch and I ask him about the Maoists. His first concern, of course, is to make sure I'm not thinking of backing out. I explain that I want to understand how much support for the Maoists is support for their cause and how much is just frustration with the regime. *"There is no support,"* he says. *"They take the people's food and their money as well – one rupee, two rupees, all they have. Maybe sixty of them come to a village and twenty go to each house. Feeding twenty people, that's like for a wedding, the people must save up a long time to have so much food. After the Maoists have eaten – they eat a lot because they don't know when they will eat again – maybe the families won't have enough for winter, and their money is gone, too, so now they can't buy salt or clothes. It takes a long time to grow enough food so they can sell some and get a little cash money. I know these people. My mother is still there. It's where I grew up. And the land ownership is a thousand years old, a few rich people still own all the land. They all live in Kathmandu where they're safe. All the other people have nothing; they must work very, very hard just to live. They're slaves really."* *"I thought that's what the Maoists are fighting against?"* I say. *"That's only words,"* he replies. *"They just take people's food and money. Nobody supports them."*

Gobardhan came to study in Kathmandu, worked as a porter to support himself, and was befriended by an English businessman who was impressed by his efforts to learn English. He offered Gobardhan a salary of 3,000 rupees a month – that's \$40 – to sell and organize treks to Tibet. *"I can have a salary!"* Gobardhan thought. He was elated. He's had his own business for four years and is currently trying to attract Thai customers in partnership with a magazine publisher in Bangkok. *"Every year business is more difficult in Nepal,"* he says, *"but most Nepalis don't try hard. If it doesn't work they just laugh, go for a chat, maybe have a drink, and that's it."*

We talk about Tibet. John has been several times. I haven't and I also want to go to Mustang. *"What we might be able to do,"* John suggests, *"Is go to Pemyantse for the festival in Sikkim, and to Tibet, and Mustang. That would probably all fit into six weeks and be quite travel-efficient."* The festival centers around the most important drama dance of the year with elaborate sword dancing in homage to a lama who portrays Kanchenjunga, lord of the mountains and god of war.

Late that afternoon we take a taxi to the airport and fly to Biratnagar through clouds that reflect the orange sun with blue, green, yellow, orange and purple descending far into the distance. It's like flying through gas nebulae in deep space.

Then I remember our taxi driver deciding we'd waited too long at the T-junction by the royal palace for a break in traffic. He started a new lane facing the oncoming cars. Nobody thought that was unusual and it occurred to me that there were no cars in Nepal until the country was opened fifty years ago so perhaps everyone drives the same way they used to walk. I wonder if there's car insurance?

Later, I ask John if he agrees with Gobardhan about the Maoists. He thinks the leaders were sincere at first but it's probably become corrupted like everything else, and he tells me another reason they're feared. They press-gang boys of fifteen or so in the villages and the boys become converts up in the mountains - the Stockholm Syndrome.



John thinks Gobardhan won't succeed with his business because he's not connected to a wealthy family. They hold all the positions associated with wealth. Nepal has no resources to exploit and tourism is the only source of money from outside so the few families that are already wealthy make sure they continue to control the sources of wealth.

It occurs to me that I'm especially interested in this now because I've been thinking about my great-grandfather, John Henry, who started full-time work in the mill when he was eight, and my grandfather, Whalley, who started when he was twelve. Whalley was a passionate advocate for trade unions that built on the reforms begun a century before when slavery was outlawed fifty years into the Industrial Revolution.

Britain was already wealthy then, though, fabulously so by comparison with Nepal, and it had an established middle class. Most Nepalis are still family farmers, shopkeepers or such so there's no opportunity for group action and there's still little wealth to be shared. And yet when Nepal was opened in 1951 its economy and Korea's were about the same size. Korea's coast and its proximity to Japan are big advantages that Nepal lacks, but the decisive one is its more open, less corrupt government.

Biratnagar is very hot and humid and Gobardhan phones to tell us the weather is very bad in Suketar. The crew just got there by bus after leaving Kathmandu on Friday. We may not be able to fly and if we can't, it'll take two days by taxi.

I tell John my theory about Nepali driving and he says it's the same in India but he does agree about the probable lack of car insurance. During dinner John mentions that his sister, who is two years older than him, has always been extremely bossy, which perhaps partly explains his determination to go off on his own and his dislike of explaining his intentions.

### **Oct 5 (Biratnagar -> Phidim)**

*"No flight to Suketar today, sir, because of runway. Maybe tomorrow."* So we return to the hotel where the man at the desk finds a man with a Land Rover who will drive us except that he's gone to the doctor. *"Back in one hour, sir."* Life insurance is advertised at the airport but not car insurance.

I've become aware of another dimension of my ignorance, economics. It seems to me that in a society where all families can produce enough to feed themselves but there's no way to export an excess, barter would be the only way to get things you couldn't produce for yourself, and the only way to increase your wealth would be at the expense of others. You'd have to work more land to produce an excess and to produce a significant one you'd need laborers. To get a dependable supply of them you'd either have to befriend them as Whalley did or enslave them, and if you had a lot of land and needed many laborers, enslavement would be the only dependable option.

It occurs to me we could have breakfast while we wait for the Land Rover. John orders two scrambled eggs. When I order two fried a spasm of alarm passes across the waiter's face and he makes a bowl shape with his hands. *"Two?"* he asks. Perhaps he'd heard 'fried rice'? I show him on the menu. *"Two?"* he asks again in a more normal tone. When it comes I have two plates, each with two eggs and John has a similar arrangement of scrambled. It reminds me of my Hungarian biology teacher's explanation of the number of legs some creature possessed, *"four pairs of eight each."*

Gobardhan got us a taxi to Birtamod, a two-hour journey north and east along the main cross-Nepal highway. There are strips of houses at frequent intervals up the Biratnagar road, cows tethered along the roadside and rice as far as you can see, which isn't far because it's so flat. The first part of the east-west road also runs through rice fields, then forest where cattle roam free and burial monuments are sprinkled among the trees, and then there's tea growing among the few trees left standing, again as far as you can see. Pickers stare at us as we pass.

At Birtamod we switch to a diesel Mahindra jeep. Its owner collects the agreed 12,000 rupees (\$160) fare to Suketar and gives 3,000 (\$40) to the driver for what will be a three or four day round trip. As we pass through the terraced rice fields where the land first slopes towards the hills I wonder if that was where terracing originated. It's the obvious thing to do on shallow slopes but a tremendous amount of work for a small return on steep ones. The fields at the bottom of the hill can be quite large and very little space is wasted on the banks. I imagine younger sons going further and further up the hillsides to establish farms for themselves as they did in the Norwegian fjords.

The road winds tortuously up the hillside but the driver knows it well and we make good time until we come to a ridge on the other side of which the road turns from tarmac to mud that's heavily rutted by the ubiquitous Tata trucks. It's like those never maintained Norfolk farm roads that so enraged Henry Williamson. Then the jeep begins breaking down. At first it seems the fuel filter is clogged, then we realize the fuel pump just isn't working. The driver manually pumps more fuel into the reservoir every time we stall so we can go a bit further. We reach Phidim at 8pm and sleep in a truckers' rest house. The beds are very hard and they have only partly effective mosquito net canopies but it's wonderful despite the dogs howling all over town.



On the tarmac road we'd seen a Maoist with an assault rifle on his back talking to a couple of villagers and further on, just south of Rekse Bazar, two men in immaculate blue-black camo walked along the road while closer to the houses there were several men in civvies with assault rifles. We had no trouble but our driver flagged down every vehicle coming towards us to ask if there were roadblocks.

## Oct 6 (Phidim -> Taplejung)

We set off at 6am, much later than the buses and trucks. The jeep has allegedly been fixed overnight and runs well for the first hour and a half but then begins stalling again. After a couple of hours of pump-and-go the driver replaces the fuel line, which doesn't help. All along the road are children immaculately dressed in British style uniforms on their way to school. Thatched roofs are beginning to be replaced by shiny new corrugated iron ones like those in Iceland. The stucco buildings often have ochre painted footings and white walls, traditional Buddhist colors. One of our stops is next to what looks like a grape arbor but which is in fact growing iskus, an off-white fruit that's usually prepared like French fries and is juicier than a potato.

Eight hours into the drive to Suketar the universal joint breaks and the drive shaft falls off near a school that just ended for the day so we're quickly surrounded by fifty or sixty small children fascinated by the repair work and even more so by John and me. As well as the stops for fuel pumping, we've also stopped behind lines of trucks bogged down in the mud, trucks with broken axles, and to commiserate with the driver of a truck whose front wheel fell off. I get my first leech when I go to investigate one of the trucks with a broken axle. It's disturbing to see a writhing worm sticking out of your leg.

An hour after the drive shaft repair we stop to replace one of the wheels whose valve was ground off against the side of an especially deep rut. It takes eleven hours to reach the outskirts of Taplejung, the town served by the Suketar airstrip, where we have to stop at an army roadblock. No soldiers are manning it but some in a tower on a hill overlooking the road yell that we should pull the barbed wire aside and drive on.

We were going to give our driver a big tip but as we neared Taplejung he kept going for a chat with friends then refused to take us the additional mile to our crew at Suketar so we gave him nothing. Dhiren, John's camera porter, came to meet us and because there's an 8pm curfew at Taplejung and it was now too late to get to Suketar he found us a hotel room. The proprietor is an ex-Gurkha who was stationed at Aldershot.

Taplejung is a squalid town with litter everywhere. John says it's typical of towns that can be reached by car but settlements off the roads are clean. When our landlord shows us to our room he checks the netting over the window and warns us to use the mosquito nets on our beds. There were no mosquitoes here until two years ago he says. His theory is they came inside a bus. They only started coming a couple of years ago when the road reached here.

After dinner the Gurkha introduces us to an Indian army major who's been seconded to the Indian Embassy to administer pensions for Nepalis. Over 100,000 Nepalis get pensions from India because Nepalis are eligible to work in any job in India, including the army, police and government. The major tells us that when he was still a soldier he served in Kashmir. As soon as you get through the tunnel into Kashmir, he says, you feel fear in the air. He spent two years pretending to be a Pakistani and studied the Koran intensively. *"Islam is the only religion that sanctions killing people of other religions,"* he says. *"Christianity doesn't, Hinduism doesn't, Buddhism doesn't, Jews don't, nobody does. Only Islam. There's something deeply wrong with those people."*

We tell him we like to trek in Sikkim but their bureaucracy makes it difficult for foreigners. *"It is a very sensitive area for India,"* he replies. *"So are Assam, Nagaland, all the regions along our borders. It's why we help Nepal so much. We are surrounded by enemies so we must be very careful. It must be our own fault, I suppose, it must be our foreign policy."* We signify sympathy and he goes on, *"Of course, there is too much*

*bureaucracy everywhere in India and terrible corruption. We have islands of excellence in a sea of incompetence."* We protest that India is less than sixty years old so he should be less harsh in his judgments. Then he introduces the Maoists. His office and residency is on the outskirts of Taplejung near the forest and he's been advised it's not safe to be there at night. That's why he stays here. It strikes me that if the Maoists succeed in destabilizing Nepal, India will feel compelled to move in to secure the area.

The major's final topic is corruption in first class cricket. He used to play cricket but won't even watch it now. The small amounts of money those who have been caught took to throw a match outrages him. The batsmen are so inconsistent they must be throwing matches all the time, he says. *"Tendulkhar makes two hundred in one match, then two or three or a duck in the next four. Nobody could be so inconsistent. They are really buggers."*

## **Oct 7 (Taplejung -> Mitlung)**

*"Charles Darwin!"* Dhiren greets me, grinning at my beard and pointing to his chin. It rained heavily all night but it's raining only lightly when we set off at 9am. Close to Taplejung the track is a trading route about four feet wide through cardamom plantings but as we get closer to the River Tamar it narrows and we're walking through rice paddy terraces. We stop to rest under a huge fig tree where Dhiren gets us fresh guavas from a farmstead, greeting the farm wife as Didi. Any woman of childbearing age here is greeted that way. It's a respectful but friendly term meaning Little Sister.

The path grows narrower and steeper and the rain is steadily heavier as we continue, so at the end of what would have been a half day's trek in good weather we take shelter on the porch of a hut in Mitlung. Dhiren lights a fire, John lies on a bamboo bench and I'm befriended by an alert, flea ridden and placid puppy.

We'd stopped for a rest at another hut earlier outside which the red Maoist flag was flying and an old lady asked Dhiren if he had any medicine for her husband who was lying on the floor under a blanket. *"John, sir,"* Dhiren relayed the request and John felt the man's temperature in a most professional manner before selecting medicine from his bag. He asked for a cup of hot water, *"tato pani"*, and stirred in what I suspected to be rehydration salts then gave the woman a second sachet with careful instructions about how to give it the next day. I'd misjudged him, though, for it was paracetamol.

A bit later Rhesum turns up. He doesn't explain his role, just that the porters are lost and he's going to look for them. We're not very surprised to see him because even while acknowledging that we refused to take him, Gobardhan kept saying he wanted to be sure we'd have good food and that Rhesum is his best cook.

I'd asked Gobardhan about the mountain biking business Rhesum was planning last year. *"His French sponsor pulled out,"* he said. *"They got about 70% done but Rhesum hadn't thought it all through and anyway Nepalis don't understand the need for transparent accounting. That's really what made his partner pull out."* Gobardhan doesn't understand that now we can't trust him to do what he says, so he won't get our business again.

Dhiren explains what we must do if we meet Maoists. We must say we're German, that's what all the porters have been told, and we must give no more than 2,000 rupees. He warns us there are also thieves who pretend to be Maoists so we must be on our guard for them, too. Hardly any Nepalis speak German and John speaks it



fluently so the deception should work even though my vocabulary is very restricted. *"Wienerschnitzel is almost the only word I know,"* I remind John. *"No problem. I'll do all the talking and you can just say 'ja'."* *"Oktoberfest,"* I reply.



Rhesum and Dhiren start coming to terms

### **Oct 8 (Mitlung -> Tawa)**

The monsoon ended officially five days ago but not in real life. They have ducks at this house that spend the night indoors. A little boy just brought them outside, carrying all three with his hands clasped round their necks. I thought they were dead but they started splashing around eagerly as soon as they hit the ground.

Two of the porters are still lost but we'll go on. They're just as likely to find us further away from Taplejung as close by. The sun comes out after a couple of hours. The trail is now one person wide and winds up and down beside the Tamar. Bananas are growing everywhere. Most of the few houses are high above us because that's where the astrologer said to build. He probably chooses places that look unlikely to be swept away by landslides.

The houses we do pass are fragrant with the soothing aroma of cow and musical with chirps of discovery from hens and chicks. The track is very steep in places and it strikes me the pundit map makers could not have taken equal steps across the mountains as I've read they did. They must have learned to judge a normative step by eye and compensated.

We meet people carrying baskets, 'dokos', of goods to trade in Taplejung, most of them carrying a stick with a T-shaped handle that's just high enough to support the weight of the doko when they rest. This is the only place John has seen these sticks. The people here are chiefly Limbus, which was the last name of our Gurkha landlord in Taplejung just as Dhiren's last name is Rai for his people.

When we stop for lunch our presence provides entertainment for a score of children, a couple of mothers and a sprightly old grandmother who dances in hopes of a donation. The children all carry schoolbooks and John reads them the story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin at the insistence of one. If he got up and started walking I'm sure they'd all follow even though he has no pipe. With all porters present we now know that Rhesum is cook and another fellow, Roshan, is sirdar.

Two men question Dhiren persistently about cameras at the lunch stop and squeeze John's big bag of them. *"It's chocolate and clothes,"* Dhiren tells them. *"Which is the leader of your group?"* they ask. *"He's not here. Maybe he's behind us over the next hill,"* Dhiren says. *"I'm just a porter."* The men watch us closely for another half hour and then leave. They're thieves. Reshum met four Maoists last night carrying assault rifles and those guys wouldn't be asking about cameras, just money.



Beehives under the eaves

We go slowly today because it's hot and humid and our muscles haven't yet hardened, and we stop for the night about an hour short of Chiruwa at a village of eight or ten houses. A Maoist leader comes to villages like this, forces one member of each household to become a Maoist, and half of the harvest must then be given to them.

In Dhiren's village south of Everest, the Maoists come through once or twice a year and take as much food as they can carry and as much money from each house as they can get, perhaps only 5 rupees. If anyone resists they're killed. When the soldiers come, which they rarely do in these remote areas, they also demand food and money, as punishment, they say, for helping the rebels. If someone reports Maoist activity to the army, the Maoists find out and kill them.

Most people are against both the Maoists and the government, which to a Nepali means anyone in an official position because such positions offer opportunities for extortion. To get a passport, for example, a Nepali must bribe the passport officer to process his application. Every Nepali was honest until the Maoists came, Dhiren says, but now there are many thieves.



John explains later that what Dhiren means by dishonesty is thieving. Corruption is considered a different thing that always existed and is perpetuated by nepotism. There's no power base to oppose the corrupt government because the only trade is on such a small scale and there's no industry apart from tourism. Consequently there's no merchant class to press for reform, just peasant farmers and government officials.

Another implication of the widespread poverty is that the Maoists must be getting support from outside Nepal because there simply isn't enough money in these hill communities to pay for assault rifles. Presumably, it's the Chinese.

The crew is getting sorted out now after a couple of days. Two of the porters from Taplejung are very young and can't carry enough so they've been replaced by ones from this village. I just realized the whirring sound I hear downstairs every so often isn't an eggbeater but a clockwork radio being rewound; the whirring is always followed by music restarting.

At first I thought people in this area are more reserved than those in Sikkim. They look at you intently but without expression and some don't look at you at all, but if the porters get them talking they become animated. It's not reserve but wariness. Dhiren says that often when they approach a house, the door and windows close. It never used to be that way because there was nothing to fear.

## **Oct 9 (Tawa -> Tapethok)**

When we came to Chiruwa we entered the territory of the new government, the area commander explained. It's a good thing I'm German because he also told us they no longer allow Americans here.

We pass through the village avoiding eye contact with the few people half-hidden in empty shops that when John was here in 1998 were filled with soft drinks and snacks for tourists (he was also here in 1999 and 2002), and just as we think we've left the atmosphere of fear behind we're stopped by a young Maoist soldier in jungle green camo. He talks with Dhiren with a pleasant smile and they shake hands, talk more, and more. At last with a very serious expression Dhiren tells us, *"John, sir, he says you must pay 5,000 rupees each."* *"Too much!"* John exclaims. *"We don't have that much!"*

Dhiren and the soldier have another long conversation then the area commander joins us. He's a very serious young man in a gray uniform who harangues Dhiren at great length about the need to support the new government. It's a long time before Dhiren can interrupt him and much longer before John can say there was no airplane so we had to pay 12,000 rupees for a taxi to get here. We understand the customary payment but no longer have enough money. John and I then empty our pockets and pool what we'd put in them for the occasion, a little over 3,000 rupees. The only other money we have, John says, is to pay the porters. Dhiren relays this and the harangue resumes.

*"If I have one rupee and you say give me a hundred how can I?"* Dhiren keeps asking. At last the area commandant agrees but then an older man appears, his ample waist sporting a belt decorated with Union Jack flags, and demands more money all over again. He's presumably the town leader and was so before he became the Maoist boss. Eventually he, too, agrees to settle for 3,000 rupees and everyone smiles. The soldier is directed to make out our receipt from the Kirat Kingdom, which this area was a thousand years ago, and we become German citizens officially authorized to trek.

The Maoist movement was started in 1974 by a very well educated man. He pressed for reforms but the king wouldn't listen so he and his followers retreated to the jungle and began training. A new constitution was established in 1991 but the Maoists will not accept a king. They have control of Western Nepal and recently started to focus on the east. Rhesum says Maoists are now in the Annapurna area where we trekked last year and you have to pay them if you want to go up Poon Hill. Rural areas can't be defended against guerrillas. Kathmandu and the other few large towns can, but they're vulnerable to blockade.

We stop for the night at Tapethok, which has two houses this side of the river and two on the other. The Maoist flag flies at each end of the bridge and prayer flags flutter in the center. There used to be a police barracks here but the Maoists blew it up and now only the foundations remain.

It's only noon but our next stop is five hours away and there's a long climb the day after. Even if we could manage the five-hour trek the porters would be too tired for the following day. It rained heavily last night and although it was dry this morning, rain clouds came back. The path was very slippery and running with water in many places. Everyone says it's very unusual to have so much rain so late in the year.

Some trail improvements are made by the Tourist Board but Dhiren says many metal bridges as well as water purification plants are donated by Mr. Kadoorie, a member of a philanthropic Hong Kong family whose fortune was founded 100 years ago in Shanghai by a Jewish Iraqi from Baghdad.

In 1828 David Sassoon was the first prominent Jewish trader to abandon the tyrannical Ottoman regime and start over again in the British Empire in India. That was the start of a great commercial migration. He, Mr Kadoorie and others set up trading companies in Bombay. At the same time, Parsis came down from Persia, the most famous being Mr. Tata. The Parsis stayed in India. The Jews continued east to Calcutta, then on to Shanghai and Hong Kong. Mr. Kadoorie is paralyzed but he flies in by helicopter to see the people he's helped. *"When he came to my village he cried,"* Dhiren told us.

A large group of trekkers pass us during the afternoon. *"Where are you from?"* they ask. *"Where are you from?"* John responds. *"France."* *"We're from Austria,"* he tells them because that gives him a better chance of getting away with his accent. *"Oh, there are some Bavarians just behind us!"* so we start retreating to our tents before they can arrive. *"How much did you pay the Maoists?"* one of the Frenchwomen asks. *"Three thousand."* *"Each?"* *"No, for both."* They don't say what they'd paid but it was evidently a lot more. Hidden in my tent I begin to read Paradise Lost. The first book and a half are very familiar even though it's forty years since I last read them.

## **Oct 10 (Tapethok -> Sekathum)**

It's another overcast morning with dark gray cloud in the south. The two middle-aged Bavarian guys have camped close to us and look to be very serious walkers so we wait for them to leave first. John might get them believe he's from Vienna, our alleged hometown, but not me. *"You could try being an English teacher who is determined never to speak Austrian on your vacation,"* John suggests.

We're back among cardamoms for the first couple of hours along with the roar of the Tamar and the loud shrilling of cicadas. By 10am most of the cloud is gone. A woman and her young son join us on the trail. Dhiren had given her medicine for her ear and



she's spending the day walking to the nearest medical center to make sure all is now well. Her husband works in Qatar.

It costs about six months' wages (6 times 10,000 rupees) to pay the broker who gets those jobs and arranges transport so you must work for a year to make it worthwhile. Also, the brokers are often deceitful. They say the job is in Qatar but it's really in Iraq. Like every other Nepali we meet, the woman is fascinated by John's size. What kind of food do we eat, she asks, to get so big?

We reach Sekathum at 2pm after a long lunch stop. Most of the cardamom has been harvested and only the least accessible slopes are still being worked but one of the crew finds a few nuts. The seedpod has three red husk sections that you peel off to get at the whitish soft stuff inside which looks like a pair of fat maggots. Inside the white stuff are the seeds that taste menthol-like when you grind them between your molars.

Today's route was again through trees up and down the steep sides of the Tamar valley but tomorrow's will be a steep climb up a grass-covered hillside, a very steep climb. I'm perfectly content this time to follow John's pace. I know I could go faster if necessary and there's no need to prove anything to myself. The porters are cheerful after two easy days and we're past the Maoists.

I finished Book II of Paradise Lost this afternoon. I must say God was short sighted at best when He chose Satan's daughter and their incestuous son to be Satan's jailers. Of course they let Satan out of Hell. What was God thinking?

### **Oct 11 (Sekathum -> Amjilosa)**

A friendly old man asks me *"What country?"* and after I say Germany I feel like the apostle who denied Jesus. Then I think what's important is not to be American, but to live right with my fellows. I don't feel much more American than Nepali. In fact when I was talking with Dhiren yesterday I realized we feel the same about our countries. *"Your country is beautiful,"* I said, *"and my country is beautiful, too. Your people are mostly good people and so are mine. You are ashamed of your government..."*



We pass some small fields of rape that's grown for oil and many banana trees, especially next to the cottage where one of the men on the 1952 Everest expedition lived. We also pass what I think is the French party but in fact only one of them is French and all the others are German so it's lucky we switched to being Austrian. We don't want trekkers talking among themselves about the two guys pretending to be German because their porters might overhear and discuss it among themselves, a villager might hear them, and soon the Maoists would know.

I told John the only outcome I can see for the Maoist rebellion is Nepal's absorption into India. He thinks the Maoists will stop short of triggering that, will participate in the government, and guys like the area commander will become local government representatives. I guess it's possible. They seemed like nice people but that's not how they're viewed by Dhiren, Rhesum, Gobardhan or anyone else with actual knowledge of their behavior.

I ask Dhiren if he has any children. *"The seed is about to burst,"* he replies happily.

This morning's trek is again along the hillside but steeper. We keep gaining and losing hundreds of feet up and down the side of the ravine. John is pleased we're on the shady side but I'd rather be on the other because the stones are very slippery. They're always wet. One of the trees we pass is about fifteen feet tall and has leaves, bark and growth habit just like the butterfly bushes Felicity planted around our house. Perhaps that's what it is, certainly there's a spectacular supply of butterflies here. After lunch we cross to the dry side of the ravine and I'm much happier. I haven't enjoyed trekking through lush vegetation and high humidity over slippery rocks.



We stop for the night at Amjilosa, which has four houses, three more than most settlements we've seen. Chiruwa was the only place after Taplejung with what you could call a Main Street. The farm we're camped at has stone walls and a flagstaff with a fir tree atop, there are two poles with prayer flags and the people look Tibetan. They have chickens, a pig in a stone pen, and cattle and can evidently support themselves even though there are many fewer trekkers these days to buy sodas. John buys one, to encourage local industry he says.

It's noticeably cooler here at 7800 feet. When it grows dark the farmer chases the chickens round the side of the house but they keep coming back, hiding behind the dokos and running into the house, and he keeps chasing them with a stick. At last they're all nesting safely under the eaves.

## **Oct 12 (Amjilosa)**

It rained hard during the night and John had a very bad time with sunstroke so we'll stay at Amjilosa today. The sky is almost completely clear again now at 8:30am, just a few wisps of very high cirrus. I chat with Rhesum, Roshan and Dhiren over breakfast, or more accurately I'm chatted to by Rhesum. A lot of it's self-promoting stories of dubious veracity but what he says about the Maoists and the king is interesting and the others support what he says.

The king's hotel, the Annapurna, is the only one that hasn't been ordered to close and it's the same with other businesses he owns. The Maoists periodically close all the other businesses to pressure the government by creating strife. *"It's magic,"* says Rhesum. One of the Maoist leaders has never been seen and nobody knows his age or what he looks like. *"Perhaps it's the king,"* I joke. *"Perhaps it is,"* they respond.

After breakfast I sit outside reading Paradise Lost for a while but it's too hot in the sun. It's only 70F in my tent so I go there. I don't want to risk becoming the second sunstroke victim. In the afternoon John comes out of his tent and lies in the breeze in the shade of the Tibetans' house. His face is very red. He's cheerful, of course, because he always makes light of trouble.

I continue reading Paradise Lost, spending short spells in the sun because although it feels the same as at lower altitudes I know it's more intense. Dhiren is studying English in college and wants me to explain Paradise Lost when I've finished. It's one of the topics of the book he's studying, along with "The Great Gatsby" and "Alice in Wonderland". He says they're rather hard to understand.

Outside a bamboo hut below the Tibetans' house four of the crew are enjoying butchering a goat that Reshum bought from the farmer, who looks much more cheerful today. One of the roosters is crowing enthusiastically, the hens are chuntering quietly around my feet and the chicks are resting. The farmer gave them some cooked rice a little earlier, the remains of breakfast, perhaps.

Late in the afternoon three porters arrive so I retreat to my tent. Later still I see a large party of trekkers when I retrieve my sleeping bag from airing over my tent. Reshum says it's the Germans and they stayed two nights where we were last but he must be mistaken because they were ahead of us on the trail yesterday. In any case, they could be different Germans so I must stay clear of them. John's back in his tent asleep.

## **Oct 13 (Amjilosa -> Gyabla)**

I don't understand why Milton's God wants to be worshiped and obeyed, or why he forbids the Tree of Knowledge knowing that man will eat its fruit. The angel argues that it's natural to worship a stronger creature but none of our cats, dogs, sheep or chickens showed any inclination to worship us. We could have used our superior strength to make them fear us but that's despicable. Also, God's punishments are excessive, and why would He consider His son's choosing to die an appropriate basis for commuting the punishment of man? None of it makes sense.



John says I wouldn't have had such thoughts in the seventeenth century, I'd have had an entirely different cast of mind. "No," I say, *"There've always been people who thought like me."* "That's true," he says, *"They burned them on stakes."* He feels better today, wants porridge for breakfast and in answer to Dhiren says, *"We walk today."*

It snowed higher up last night but already at 7:30 the morning sun is fiercely hot. There was thunder, lightning and rain where we camped, typical pre-monsoon weather. It's usually clear in the mornings and overcast later after the monsoon. The vegetation is chiefly rhododendron, holly and bamboo, a very odd combination and quite different from lower where it's wetter. There are some terraces on this side of the valley but the opposite side is heavily forested.



The first half-hour of the trek is enlivened by explosions and arias of groans from John that remind me of Major Bludnok after a too enthusiastic intake of curried eggs.

It's exhilarating to think that Hooker was pottering about these trails a hundred and fifty years ago. Where we stop for lunch it's a delightful 75F and we're cooled by a strong breeze but a hundred feet above us the leaves aren't moving. After lunch we continue along the valley side. The trail is through young bamboo as well as other trees I don't recognize. Every so often we cross a small stream that crashes down the mountainside. Some have wooden bridges but most require balancing on stones. There's only been one river so far that was deep enough to warrant removing our boots and that was not far from Taplejung. There are surprisingly few insects up here except next to the houses, most of which keep honeybees.

We stop for the night at Gyabla, 8,850 feet, a small plain surrounded by steep mountain sides. It's the first place we've seen with fields big enough to plow. They're 30 or 40 feet across and 60 or 80 long. A young boy is leading a pair of buffalo and his older brother turns the plow at the end of each row. Their parents are breaking the clods with shovels. There's an apple orchard with young trees surrounded by a bamboo fence. Prayer flags blow at the south end of the plain overlooking the valley. Up the valley to the east snow covered mountains are just visible. Jannu is the highest. It'll be spectacular in the morning.





A geologist came here several years ago and decided the valley was glaciated as far south as we camped last night. Nobody else had studied the valley so he became the world authority. Nepali geologists studying the valley under the direction of Japanese teachers recently concluded that the glaciations extended only to some distance north of here, which is the way it looks to me, but when they tried to get their conclusions published their paper was sent to the original geologist who said they're wrong.

A boy of about six, perhaps the one who was leading the buffaloes, is standing beside me, fascinated by my writing. His mother just called and he asked for a pen. One's constantly being asked for a pen because a few years ago someone had the idea that giving pens to village children would encourage literacy.



The breeze is coming back up the valley now. The sun heated the plains this morning so the pressure dropped as the air rose. Air rushed down from the mountains to equalize the pressure. Then the earth revolved further and the sun began to heat the mountains so the air there began to rise and, since the pressure was then lower at the high end of the valleys, the breeze reversed direction.

The sun is still shining on the mountains northeast up by Ghunsa where we'll go tomorrow but it has already been hidden here for most of the afternoon.

The air is still by 4pm and by 6pm darkness has fallen. I can just make out a bat overhead. Two fireflies pass by. They have a steady flight and a continuous but less bright glow than those in Connecticut.

Dhiren talked with the farmer's parents. Many years ago, in 1970, a Japanese climbing expedition passed through here, they told him. There were 700 porters, so many that they scared a yeti. The old man didn't see the yeti because it was dark but as it came down the hill and across the river it gave their characteristic shrill cry of alarm. Another time a foreigner was exploring here on his own and got lost. At last he came scrambling down the mountainside like a wounded monkey. He'd had nothing to eat but bamboo shoots for seven days and he had fallen and broken his leg. The farmer carried him on his back all the way to Taplejung.

There were half a dozen trekking groups camped here each time John came in the past but this time we're the only ones. The three Germans are presumably out of sight further up the valley. This area was only opened for trekking in the early 1990s. Before that only climbing expeditions could come.

### **Oct 14 (Gyabla -> Phale)**

The stars were bright over the whole sky at 4am but there's low cloud by 6am and rain by 7am, which continues intermittently all day. We have a good trek to Phale along the valley bottom next to the river, up and down but without the slippery stone steps, and we meet our first dzo train. The bamboo gives out almost immediately and then we walk through conifers and rhododendron.

Phale is at the bottom of the flat area of the valley and it'll be a level walk from here to Ghunsa, a substantial village surrounded by steep, high mountainsides. Phale is peopled mainly by Tibetan refugees while Ghunsa has mostly Sherpas. Our porters learn that one of the six Germans we've been avoiding died yesterday of altitude sickness. They're only at 13,000 feet but he hadn't taken enough time to acclimate.

### **Oct 15 (Phale -> Ghunsa)**

Our campsite is in a garden in Ghunsa at 11,200 feet. I wake periodically during the night to the low tinkling of yak bells, and get up when a yak grunts loudly just outside my tent. A bit later a helicopter flies up the valley and on to Kangbachen to pick up the dead German. John's view is that nobody dies of altitude sickness; they die of stupidity. They set a schedule that allows for nothing to go wrong then struggle to catch up, they climb as fast as they can with no pauses for acclimatization, and when they feel the warning symptoms they say nothing and press on.

Ghunsa is much cleaner and better maintained than other villages we've seen, which John attributes to a forceful headman. There's a roughly cobbled main street and a



couple of side streets. Our camp is on the outskirts on the opposite side from the bridges and as always the porters have placed us at the house of the prettiest girl in the village, the PGV. This one has a slight limp. Polio is endemic although John has never seen it very far advanced.







John taking photos of the PGV



There are two bridges over the River Ghunsa, the original cantilevered one and a new metal suspension bridge donated by Mr. Kadoorie. On the way to the bridges is the old gatehouse, one of very few still intact. It's decorated inside with illustrations of fierce gods because everything that enters the village must come that way and no bad thing



will be able to pass the protective gods. The gatehouse isn't easy to get to now, though, because of a big landslide on the village side. It's had recent repairs but the workmanship is crude compared to the original.



The old village gatehouse

There's also a gumpa on the hillside opposite that's sited so it will catch the sun's first rays, which enter the valley around 10am. Some distance above it is what looks like a small shack on an outcrop of rock. Perhaps it's a ritod, a place for solitary meditation. They're always suspended on a dominating spot with, according to a Tibetan verse, *"The mountain rock behind, the mountain lake in front"*. A lake is best but a stream like the River Ghunsa is also acceptable.

Yaks and chickens amble about and a flight of snow pigeons wheels over the gumpa. According to the books pigeons live on grain but John has discovered their true passion is for chocolate. The sun hasn't reached the valley yet so it's still only 40F and there's ice on the tent walls.

Three of the porters went back to Taplejung last night and two new ones will be hired here to direct us over the pass. We need fewer porters now because we've used some of our supplies. It's surprisingly quiet in the village considering there are about sixty houses and the population must be at least three hundred. We think the headman must have sent all the able-bodied folks to bring in the potato harvest at Kangbachen. There are still many children around, all with very runny noses. *"Namaste, give me one pen,"* they say or *"Namaste chocolate."*

The weather is very variable. The sun came out at 10:30 so I went to explore and take photographs, then it began to snow and turned cold. An hour later the sun returned and it was very hot, then soon after it turned cold again.

The fire inside the PGV's house is always alight and when it began to snow her father climbed on the roof and covered the chimney hole by adjusting the loose planks. When

the sun comes out the fire is allowed to burn down to embers. Like all the others I've seen it's fed from the front. The sticks are pushed further in as they burn down just as old Ike is reported to have done with the stove in our farmhouse kitchen. At the other end of the main room half-inch cubes of yak cheese threaded on string hang like crude necklaces from the ceiling.

The PGV's mother is outside pounding millet in a scooped out length of tree trunk using a stave of wood that's rounded at each end and narrower in the center where she holds it. Her husband leans against the fence watching. She tips the crushed grain into a large aluminum pan and carries it to the water supply out on the street. It's too heavy once she's half filled it with water so her husband helps carry it back to the house where it will mature into chang.

It's a pretty good life for the men here. They do the building and plowing and the women do everything else. In spring when the ground thaws the headman decides on the day when all the men must go to the fields and till the soil for the potato crop. All the women must go from house to house to get the dung from where the animals wintered on the ground floor. They carry it to the fields in their dokos.

I enjoyed some of the local tea yesterday. It's churned in a three foot length of bamboo painted black and decorated with gold colored bands and it consists of ghee, salt, water and tea. The mixture is heated slowly over the fire. The woman of the house of course must do the churning. This woman is also working, not very intensively, to weave a carpet on a loom on the deck where one enters the house. She's copying the design from a carpet that's hanging backside out over the top of the loom. The door where you enter the house has a foot-high board at the bottom to keep snow out.



One of Dhiren's portering jobs was for a Russian climbing expedition. They had to carry huge quantities of vodka because as one climber explained, *"With one bottle of vodka I can climb 1,000 meters, so to climb 7,000 meters I need seven bottles."* Most people consider even a small amount of alcohol dangerous at high altitudes.



Dhiren is very loyal to his village. When I asked where his home is he told me about his village although he now lives in Kathmandu. His goals in life are first to get a school established in his village, then a medical center, and third a small hydroelectric plant. *"It takes four hours to get to school," he explained, "And first the children must cut grass for the animals, then have breakfast and run, run, run to school, so by the time they get there they are very tired. After school they must go home and cut more grass for the animals."*

## **Oct 16 (Ghunsa -> Rapka Kharka)**

There was a hard frost last night but it's almost 40F because the valley is so sheltered. A yak has been grunting contemplatively outside my tent for the last half hour, a rooster is crowing and the crew is coughing. The air is still and the sky is perfectly clear. I feel the best I've felt on the trek so far.

One of the fellows on a previous trek of John's was very musical. He was greatly bothered by the bell of a nak (female yak) that he said was tuned to F sharp. They called this nak F Sharp and her calf F Minor. Early one morning the man could stand it no longer. He burst out of his tent, chased F Sharp all round the campsite, fell in the river, but succeeded in de-belling her. Awakened by the commotion, John discovered the man sitting in the middle of the river in nothing but his underpants triumphantly holding the bell aloft by its clapper. Then they noticed Quasimodo, a very large yak, about to settle against the musician's tent as if it was a nice warm boulder. Unlike a boulder, the tent collapsed.

In the main room of the house the mother, father and four small children are sitting by the fire drinking tea. I still can't work out how many children there are in this family. A towel hangs by the entrance that everyone uses to dry their hands and wipe their nose. They live in such close proximity that I suppose they'd infect each other, anyway. The PGV is sweeping the floor again. She does it several times a day.

Juniper is burning in a brazier outside this and every other house in the village, the smoke rising vertically. The family is very calm. The only sign of aggression I've seen since we came to Ghunsa was a small boy throwing a stone at a hen and he had a delinquent air about him. I wonder if a Gurkha family would feel different since theirs is a culture of soldiering. Perhaps so but more because Gurkhas are Hindu and these people are Buddhist.

I sit by the fire with the family while the crew packs. The PGV gives me a couple of bits of yak cheese and I learn it's just as hard as I expected and almost tasteless. I wait until we are well outside the village before throwing away the piece I've been chewing. I made no progress on it at all.

It's a damp, steep climb up the valley side through rhododendron and pine trees up to three feet in diameter that must be two or three hundred years old. We stop at 13,000 feet for a long rest in the sun overlooking the lateral moraine where we'll camp tonight. The Nyingma La on the opposite side of the Ghunsa valley is brightly sunlit. We stop again 500 feet higher and Dhiren spots 45 blue sheep high above us, the first I've seen. It's a real slog after that to the top of the north side of the lateral moraine, up the opposite one then down the far side to our camp at 13,800 feet. We're higher than we'd planned so we'll stay here tomorrow to acclimate.



Raphael warns Adam: "*Knowledge is as food ... surfeit soon turns Wisdom to Folly, as Nourishment to Wind.*" I disagree about knowledge but I must confess he's right about food; I ate less today and felt better. I did experience Sleeping Bag Lassitude, however. The early Himalayan mountaineers observed that when they were on glaciers they were apt to lose all energy and they named the condition Glacier Lassitude. I experience the same thing when I get into my sleeping bag. I didn't have shortness of breath today, though, as I did at Dzongri. I had to breathe a little deeper than usual on the steepest parts but not as much as when I walk at home with heavily weighted vests. It may be because I've done more training before this trip but it's more likely because I'm going at John's sensible pace.

### **Oct 17 (Rapka Kharka -> Yamatari Glacier)**

I didn't want to get up this morning. I'd been feeling twinges of headache during the night along with a slightly stuffed nose and trying not to worry that it might turn into a real headache. It was obviously cold outside this morning, but when the coffee came and I looked outside it was clear and very beautiful,. That changed my mind.

We climb the Yamatari Glacier to 14,900 feet and get a terrific view of Jannu and Boktoh almost behind the ridge on our right as we face Jannu. A few clouds develop at midday but we have a long time for photography.

The crew lit a fire of dwarf rhododendron last night and prayed for good weather. One of the youngest porters brought kerosene in a plastic food wrapper to get the fire started and put the wrapper on the fire. Roshan made him take it off. He threw it on the ground. Roshan made him pick it up and take it back to the waste pile by the mess tent. Then the fire went out and the boy brought more kerosene in the plastic wrapper. Again he threw it on the fire and again Roshan made him take it off and return it to the mess tent. I don't think the boy's prayers can have been the efficacious ones, more likely they were Dhiren's, but if the prayers were to a God like Milton's, who knows?





Clambering up the moraine is difficult because the rocks shift and it's worse going back because the sun has melted the ice that helps keep the rocks stable in the morning. It's easier to balance when you're climbing, too. Glaciers are covered with loose rock because ice travels down from the snows and pushes rocks up on each side like a plow piling snow on the sides of the road. Boulders tumble down from the sides of the valley, too, so a glacier consists of the glacier itself running down the center of a valley, lateral moraine on each side and on the other side of them another valley whose far side is made up of boulders of all sizes. Down these valleys seasonal streams flow.

Walking up these particular side valleys isn't too hard because the yaks that pasture here in the spring have made paths round the larger boulders and through the fragrant dwarf rhododendron. To get a good view of the mountains, though, you must at some point work your way up the side of the valley over the unstable boulders. I did that part very slowly and made my descent even more so.



The weather is spectacularly good all day. Jannu at the head of the valley and to the north seem very close. Boktoh, at the head of the valley and south, is extraordinarily steep and entirely snow-covered. Far to the west two of the Three Sisters are visible

and we could probably see Everest if we climbed higher. Back at the camp we find one of the porters has broken John's kukri. It's an antique made by a craftsman in one of the high villages using good steel, not like the ones you see in Kathmandu. The handle snapped in half because the steel that runs through the entire handle is badly rusted. John is very gracious and says perhaps he can mend it when he gets home.

We eat lunch although I'd prefer to have skipped it because the altitude makes me less hungry than usual. After lying down for half an hour I fetch *Paradise Lost* and a foam mattress and read Book 8. It's 3:30 now and the sun is about to go down behind the mountains, clouds are coming up from the west although the ones hovering over Jannu have almost gone. I get out a fleece jacket and hope for good photography light later.

A Nepali legend explains how the mountains came here and why they have clouds. The mountains were the oldest children of the god Prajapati and they once had wings. They flew all over the world wherever they liked, but Indra, the Indian god of rain, wanted to bring water to the people of Nepal so he cut the mountains' wings off and they fell to the earth. Their wings became clouds that cling to them even now. That's why wherever there are mountains there are also clouds and nourishing rain.

### **Oct 18 (Rapka Kharka -> Lapsang)**

We start at 6:30am because it will be a hard climb, reach 17,000 foot Lapsang La at 4:30 pm and arrive at the camp at 8:30pm. Annapurna with its double hump is clearly visible looking west from Lapsang La, then two nearer peaks, then Makalu, maybe Choyu, and perhaps Everest far to the north.



The descent from Lapsang La is hard because the whole route is over a jumble of unstable rocks and we do most of it after dark. I'm very glad I brought a really good head flashlight. The last hour and a half are easier because two of the crew come to meet us with a kerosene torch they've improvised from a juice bottle. It's a good thing they did because we wouldn't have found the way on our own.





When we get to the camp we find that one of the porters developed altitude sickness and Reshum took him further down. They come back at 7:45 the next morning after descending for six hours until at last the porter felt OK and fell asleep where they were on the trail.

### **Oct 19 (Lapsang -> Ramche)**

Our camp overlooks the Yalung Glacier, a river of jumbled rocks. To the east there's a fine view of Kabru, Pandim, Ratong and Kokthang but I can't get pictures because it would be directly into the sun and we need to go lower to Ramche pretty soon. It's 15,700 feet here and several of the porters are complaining about the cold. The view of



Kabru and Ratong is particularly exciting. Ratong Glacier curves in from the south side of Ratong and in the distance behind is Kabru Dome.

I hadn't imagined climbing up and down glaciers would be so hard but it's now obvious why it would be. The boulders tumble down until they've slowed just enough to lodge precariously behind others that fell earlier, so the slope is as steep as gravity allows. Nothing binds the rocks together except friction, and the additional weight of a human easily disturbs their balance. The Lapsang La is very little used because its approach is impossible for yaks. I also hadn't understood why it took the surveyors so long to work out which are the highest mountains. It's because in this very clear air you can't tell how far away they are relative to each other and a lower one that's closer looks bigger.

It's 14,700 feet at Ramche at the head of the plain north of the Yalung Glacier. The downhill part of the walk here was easier than usual because there was soil binding the stones together and the rest of the walk was flat. Yak herders like it here because there's a strip of water next to the lateral moraine. It's sunny again today with just wisps of cloud coming up the valley from the west.





Breakfast today was cooked by Ram, one of the cook's boys. It was very tasty but he'll have to learn a lot more before he can graduate to become a full-fledged cook. Learning to prepare a variety of meals that appeal to Europeans is the simpler part of the job. You also have to be able to work out how much food of what kinds must be carried and what you'll be able to buy on the trek. Ram enjoys seeking out food he can buy from the locals. As we got closer to the end of the trek he began buying things he could take to Kathmandu to sell at a profit.

There's almost always a wind blowing during the day. Although it's 65F now it feels quite a bit colder. The temperature drops below freezing at night but the air is usually still then so it doesn't feel so cold.

Two small children come leaping down the dwarf rhododendron covered moraine and wander around the lake laughing uproariously. A woman yak herder who looks Tibetan calls to them but they continue laughing merrily and begin splashing each other. I haven't seen children up here playing this way before. I don't know how many this is true of but at least some people here don't become blasé about their extraordinarily beautiful world. I imagine life here is similar to my early childhood in a remote farm cottage in England, primitive but taken in the right spirit, very happy.



Dhiren asked us not to have lunch where John suggested yesterday when we were climbing the glacier. *"It would be better to eat up there, John sir,"* he said. *"If we stop here God will be angry."* I asked him later why God would be angry and he said it was because the place where the steep part of the glacier meets the shallow part is one of God's places, so one should not do anything dirty there. The peaks of mountains are also God's place. One should always pray to be worthy before climbing and then for forgiveness for trespassing. One must never kill anything on a climb. God will punish you severely if you do.





The shadows on the mountains make the fault lines visible. You can see where the rock fractured and one layer slid over another as these mountains were pushed higher by the Indian tectonic plate driving north. It's different in Iceland because those rocks dropped from the sky or flowed over the surface. Instead of fractures you get dramatic erosion.

The hills on either side as we descended the Lapsang La are much favored by blue sheep although we saw none. The locals claim to have seen a snow leopard and her cub there recently and perhaps they did. I saw a paw print on the trail below the pass and Dhiren found scat that might have been from one. When John cut it open, though, there were no fragments of bone or hairs. It most likely came from one of the yak herders' dogs. The next day Dhiren found more scat which this time was a mass of blue sheep hair and definitely had been left by a snow leopard. Blue sheep usually stay well away from people but they come much closer to Ramche when the yak herders are here. If a snow leopard is around while you're here the sheep spend the night close to your tent, less than 50 yards away, because leopards won't come near people.

It's night now. We went half way up the valley towards Oktang to get a close view of Kanchenjunga and took many pictures while the sun set and the light changed. Boktoh and a ridge of other snow covered mountains lit by the moon are behind my tent, Ratong dominates the head of the valley supported by the snow wall of Kabru, and the mountains facing me are in shadow. Vapor rises from the lake towards the moon. Uncountable stars are overhead and the yaks are just visible in the moonlight. We're surrounded by the soothing resonance of their bells.

## Oct 20 (Ramche -> Oktang)

Harsh environments teach respect for the world whether or not you're willing to learn. Dhiren went on a very well equipped Annapurna trek. All the crew got boots, socks, gloves and sunglasses. One refused to wear his boots and carried them on his doko because he'd always worn only flip-flops, he said, but he didn't make it to Muktinath. His left foot froze. The sirdar carried him to Jomsum and flew him to Pokhara but it was too late, his foot couldn't be saved. It feels very clear among these mountains where the weather changes so fast, there's so little to support life and the mountains are constantly crumbling that we're guests here. Survival is only possible by living in harmony with what belongs here.

Sleeping Bag Lassitude, I've come to realize, is caused in part by lack of oxygen and also by the fact that it takes only two or three minutes outside the bag to become thoroughly chilled but at least half an hour back in the bag to restore warmth. My friend, Jack, later shed more light on this phenomenon, *"I remember my 91 year old Uncle telling me that he has started to use an oxygen tank, especially at night when he sleeps. He said you use more oxygen when you sleep than you do when awake; apart from strenuous activity, that is. I guess this is true and if so, might be another reason for Sleeping Bag Lassitude. On sailing trips in the Caribbean we called it 'tropical sloth', but that was not caused by lack of oxygen but rather an overabundance of alcohol."*

A porter with the French group says one of their party's girlfriend died here a year ago. He came back to honor where she died. The one who died this year was in the German group. He'd been to Nepal eight times before and thought he knew everything. He drank rum and chang every night, and refused to take notice of the guide's warnings.

We saw a small lammergeyer on the easy walk up to Oktang as well as more blue sheep and a pika. The weather continues to be amazingly good. We're very close to Jannu and Ratong here at 15,560 feet. It's completely quiet at Oktang for the first time since we started this trek. There's no water up here so there's no rushing sound as there has been everywhere else. The porters carried an overnight supply of water for us from Ramche and several of them have returned there for the night.

This afternoon I climb the moraine to get as close as you can, unless you're a climber, to Kanchenjunga. The glacier below is a spectacular mélange of rock and ice with frozen pools next to the mountain. There's an avalanche on Rathong as I return.

On the narrow plain between the lateral moraine and the mountain I suddenly remember walking across the eldhraun in Iceland, the old weathered lava, and realize that the two areas have a similar feel because both were formed by a long ago flow even though one was hot and the other cold.

Later I finish Book 9 of Paradise Lost. Satan persuaded Eve to eat the Forbidden Fruit. Adam ate, too, knowing it was a mistake but so enthralled by Eve that he was determined to share her fate, if in fact there was punishment. It reminded me of Philip K. Dick's comment that almost all his friends were either dead or psychotic as a result of playing with drugs that nobody had told them were dangerous. They were like children playing in the road, he said, but I reckon that's disingenuous. They did know it was dangerous but they didn't believe what they knew.

We go up the mountain at the end of the afternoon to take sunset pictures of Kokthang, Rotang, Jannu and Kanchenjunga but the wind is bitterly cold and the light never does get very exciting because there's no air pollution.





Kanchenjuga



In the mess tent later we are entertained by Ram, who was also a porter on our Annapurna trek last year. He tells stories about treks he's been on with Japanese groups. The trekkers and crew had no common language so each spoke their own. Ram speaks only in Nepali and keeps me laughing for a couple of hours even though I can't understand a word.

After dinner as we sit around the campfire, clouds start up the valley from the south. When they get close Rhesum plucks some dwarf rhododendron leaves and throws them on the fire to make the clouds go away. Very soon, they do begin to retreat, and so do I because a small fire in a cold wind just isn't enough.





Avalanche on Rathong





Ram



## Oct 21 (Oktang -> Cheram)

On a previous trek John was camped a bit further down the valley. He saw blue sheep on the mountain and suddenly one flung itself into the air, collapsed to the ground, then kept repeating the process. The other sheep turned to look but went back to grazing. By the time John got there the sheep was dead, strangled by a poacher's noose. He kept careful watch as it grew dark and when he spotted two poachers approaching, he and his companions crept up and burst into a charge when they got close, shouting and taking flash photographs. The poachers ran away. Three or four years later Dhiren was back here and learned that the poachers had fled to India for two years in case the police recognized them from the photos. In fact there'd been no hope of getting close enough and John had only been using the flash. This story wouldn't happen now because there are no longer any police in the area. The Maoists bombed them out.



Blue sheep

It was an easy walk down to Cheram this morning. It's a major trekking nexus and half a dozen groups were camped there but we're going across the river to camp on the way up to the pass. The German trekkers we keep meeting were coming up the trail this morning. They took the usual pass while we were crossing the Lapsang La. John had walked on ahead and one of them insisted on engaging him in conversation. *"We've been rumbled,"* he told me later. *"What did you tell them when they twigged that we're not Austrian?"* I asked. *"Nothing,"* he said, *"I just told them when they get to Ramche they should walk round the corner to see Kanchenjunga at sunset."*

It's 12,800 feet at Cheram. The mountainside on the west is covered with cedars and on the east with rhododendrons. Looking south, the top of the mountain is bare, below that it's entirely covered with rhododendron, then there's a line of pine trees and below that the land again slopes down and is covered with a mix of pine and rhododendron.

The line of pines marks the original valley floor. When the glacier retreated, torrents of water cut a deeper V-shaped channel but the valley to the east where we're going is now a hanging valley at the level of the original valley floor.



Tonight's campsite is a little higher than Cheram in the valley where Lhatsung rested before introducing Buddhism to Sikkim in the seventeenth century. He was exhausted by his long and perilous journey from Tibet but after only a few days here he was so refreshed that he was able to fly to the 24,000 foot summit of Kabru and stay there for two weeks. He named the valley Namgi Tsal, meaning Grove of Joy. It's very beautiful



*"Does your wife worry when you go away on treks?" I asked Dhiren. "No, she knows it's my job," he told me and we continued walking. "Maybe she worries a little bit," he said after a couple of minutes, "but before we left we gave your name and John's name and my name to a big lama in Kathmandu and he prays for us, so we'll be safe."*

Our youngest porter is eighteen but he's barely five feet tall, his voice hasn't broken, and he looks about fourteen. When he's not on a trek he carries doko loads of cardamom from Taplejung where he lives over the hills to where it's exported to India.

## **Oct 22 (Cheram -> Simaram Lase)**

There's a hard frost this morning here at 12,750 feet that looks like a white shadow on the west side of every dwarf rhododendron. The sun has already burned off the rest of the night's covering. There's ice along the sides of the river that will soon melt, too. The sky is perfectly clear again. Maybe it's related to the monsoon's early devastating arrival and late end this year. Hundreds of people down in the Terai drowned.

I wondered why the larger square film used in John's Mamiya was supplanted in the mass market by 35mm film. It's because in the 1930s Leica had the idea of using cine film in still cameras because it's easier to handle and could more easily support a larger number of pictures per roll. Its continued use is because the technology innovation in film has always been driven by the movie industry. Leica later lost their market lead because although they still make the best lenses from an optical standpoint, they failed to embrace micro-server motors and related technologies that Canon and others adopted to provide fast auto-focus.

We climb to the top of the valley that Douglas Freshfield dismissed as 'boring' but which is beautiful and we make tonight's campsite at 13,800 feet. Perhaps Freshfield was



getting tired. A stream rushes over stones down the center of the valley and the land slopes elegantly up, covered with dwarf rhododendrons that catch the sun and highlight the curving paths left by snow erosion. The slopes are crowned by heavily fissured, almost vertical mountains. All five of the dwarf bushes whose leaves and twigs are burned as incense grow alongside the track.



The mountains to the northwest where we started have snow on a flat area at their summit that's invisible from lower down. Ahead of us the approach to Khang La rises to the left and there's a more forbidding route to the right where we'll go tomorrow. Instead of taking the obvious pass as John did last time he was here we'll go to the left when we're most of the way up.

The drawback of this location is the sun sets behind the mountains at 2:30. Now I've spent more time in the Himalaya I have more sympathy for the locals cutting firewood. I also suspect the greater damage in Nepal than Sikkim is chiefly the result of higher population density. Dhiren was horrified by the cutting we saw at Cheram yesterday. *"It took a thousand years for this to grow!"* he said.

Our campfire this evening is dwarf rhododendron twigs and when I see the porters all bent over in the half-light searching for dry twigs it reminds me of Millais' Reapers although the scene would be better suited to Van Gogh.

John remembers an article about someone's attempt to work out from the star positions where Van Gogh was when he painted one of his starry nights and I imagine the media frenzy if the answer turned out to be Taplejung.

I haven't woken with that 'what am I doing here?' feeling for the last few days. I've been waking instead feeling that I'm gathering fuel for a growth spurt of some kind. I was going to ask Dhiren what's at the center of his beliefs but then realized I'm not certain about that myself. It's something along the lines that behavior is supreme, that it's what you do that matters, and that one should constantly be both alert and reflective to improve one's understanding and practice of better behavior.

## **Oct 23 (Simeram Lase -> Semo La)**

The steep climb to the 15,200 foot Semo La up a well worn track that's just wide enough for yaks takes us three hours and is much easier than climbing moraine. The descent to our 13,850 foot campsite at the base of the pass takes only half that time.

The only water at this campsite is a pool. There's a substantial foundation for a two room yak herders' hut higher up, which they'll roof with a tarpaulin when spring comes and the stream that's now dry is flowing and the grass is good. About an hour after we make camp it begins to snow and I fervently hope it stops because there's no way over the mountains between our camp and the approach to Khang La as we'd hoped. Going back down today's slope when it was covered with snow would be very difficult.



Dhiren says they've burned eggshells on a fire of dwarf rhododendron to make the snow fall elsewhere so perhaps we'll be spared the slippery slope. The snow does stop but returns briefly a couple of hours later in search of more propitiation or maybe having forgotten this is a place it should avoid.

Meanwhile I finish *Paradise Lost* and get into my sleeping bag pretending to consider if I should now reread it or if I should start *Njal's Saga*. I very soon fall asleep.

## **Oct 24 (Semo La -> Not-the-Chongpa La)**

John, Dhiren and I set off at 6am to climb what we hope is the Chongpa La and reach the pass just after 10, but the clouds are already so low we can't be sure where we are except it's not Chongpa La, so Dhiren goes to tell Roshan to move the campsite to the base of our new theory about what must be Chongpa La. Meanwhile Reshum sent three porters back to Cheram to buy food, or maybe liquor is the real mission? Last night the crew was bemoaning the fact that Nepal's big annual festival is starting and they can't participate.

Our new campsite is at 14,450 feet and its location according to my GPS is north of where we thought we were. A pass with prayer flags is visible from here so although



there's a lot of cloud obscuring it, we decide to investigate. It's a rough climb up an indistinct yak trail for a couple of hours over piled boulders to 15,600 feet, which is higher than Chongpa La. We realize we're on a pass that's not on any of our maps but John recognizes the half dozen small lakes on the Sikkim side and that confirms the Chongpa La is south of here.



The Sikkim side of this pass is much more difficult than Chongpa La's, and where we just climbed was harder than the approach to a major pass should be. We can intermittently see the steep climb we did last spring from Gomathang and when we've seen all that's visible, John and Dhiren add our prayer flags to the poles where one crosses the pass. John falls on the elbow he damaged in Sikkim on the way down. He says he only frightened himself but when I ask again later he admits it 'hurts like hell'.





Back at the campsite the crew has made a fire using roof poles from the yak herders' hut. I storm into the mess tent and say to Rhesum, who's playing cards, "*We're burning the yak herders' roof!*" "*No we're not.*" "*We sure are!*" Realizing I'm not going to back off he rushes out of the tent and yells at the porters by the fire. With simulated outrage he makes them take the remaining poles back to the hut. I tell him there's a stack of firewood inside the hut and he ignores me but a couple of minutes later asks, "*You said there's firewood inside the hut?*" "*Yes, it's covered with rags.*" He sends a couple of the porters to get it and I sadly realize it's the same everywhere. If there's blame to be assigned, the alert manager will always give it to the underlings.

## **Oct 25 (Not-the-Chongpa La -> Khang La)**

It snowed half an inch overnight. The sky was almost cloudless at 5:30 this morning but three hours later a huge mass of cumulus is growing to the west. Dhiren, Reshum and Roshan set off early to investigate whether there is a way to Khang La through the valley we passed yesterday. If there is, we'll have fulfilled John's quest to find how a hundred and fifty years ago Captain Sherwill got from Chongpa La to Khang La. John's elbow is OK again this morning; he'd forgotten about it until I asked.

Reshum runs back and tells us they've found a way out of the valley so we eagerly set off. It's a tough climb to 15,725 feet up an extremely tumbled mass of boulders. John told me the other day that when presented with a choice, a Nepali will always go up. I think it's really John who does that; the porters followed a much easier route than ours.

When we finally reach the pass we discover we're at the very top of the valley where John and Dhiren had on a previous expedition discovered the lake that Captain Sherwill saw on his way to Khang La. We also discover that Rhesum has led the crew a long way down the valley to set up camp, no doubt eager to return to civilization and away from the cold at these altitudes. We want to explore Khang La but have to go the other way to the campsite and it's almost 3 by the time we get there. Nevertheless, Rhesum proposes to move the campsite up to the second valley and everyone agrees, so at the end of the afternoon we're back at 15,400 feet. It's not very cold here because the lower end of this valley is protected on every side. This is the middle of three valleys, one above the other on the way to Khang La.





## **Oct 26 (Khang La -> Cheram)**

We arranged coffee and porridge for 5 this morning so John and I could set off for Khang La at first light. In theory it will take us two hours to get up and one to get back. We'll get a good view before the clouds come and be back in time for breakfast. Fittingly, though, since 'Khang La' is Tibetan for 'snowy pass' there's heavy cloud and light snow when we wake.

We wait half an hour 'til we can see our feet and then set out, hoping the sky will clear. John slips on the icy rocks and falls full length in the first stream but refuses to acknowledge any discomfort and after emptying his boots we continue on our way. The clouds move but never lift.

We take three hours to climb the 16,800 foot pass because of the steep, unstable boulder piles and very little is visible when we get there so after a short rest we start back. The descent also takes three hours because the boulders are even more slippery and unstable now they've warmed.

After what we decide to call lunch since it's too late for self-respecting explorers to have breakfast we begin the trek down to Lhatsun's restful valley on what's variously estimated to be a two to five hour walk. I'm feeling surprisingly fit considering the hard treks of the last few days and I'm breathing easier than in Sikkim at similar altitudes. We're about to start the long return to civilization and although I'm not looking forward to the wet stones, I am ready to go home.

We go quite fast and reach the campsite in three hours. Our climbing pace is slow because John's theory is that muscles need more oxygen when you're climbing and there's less of it as you get higher so you should take frequent rest stops. By the same theory you need fewer pauses when you're descending because more oxygen becomes available. You do still need to rest periodically, of course, to avoid over-exerting yourself and getting altitude sickness.

This descent is down steep snow-covered moraine, along boulder-strewn flat moraine, across frequent streams, and along the sides of channels cut by the main river that are made of loose soil and small stones. T

he second half of the walk is over a well-worn foot-wide track through bush rhododendrons, a soothing experience after the bareness of the higher altitudes. It snows lightly and intermittently all day and visibility is poor, a few hundred feet at best and often much less. The weather was like this all the time on more than half of John's Himalaya treks. We've been extraordinarily lucky this time.

At the campsite the crew is crowded round a large fire. I join them for a few minutes but the snow makes me wet faster than the heat dries me, so I go in the mess tent where Reshum is cooking. He tells me the population of Kathmandu has almost doubled in the last couple of years because so many villagers have moved there to escape the Maoists' demands for food and money. They do day laboring work and have a pretty bad time but they're safe from the Maoist and army guns. Rhesum's best friend lost three of his brothers last year, shot by drunken soldiers who said they were Maoists. They weren't but nobody dares challenge the soldiers.

I sleep soundly from 7pm until 4:14am when I briefly go outside. The snow has stopped and the moon is almost full. It's beautiful and I think of setting up my camera and tripod but easeful sloth directs me back to my sleeping bag.

## **Oct 27 (Cheram -> Tortong)**

I wake at 7:30 to a sunny day or at least a sunny start, feeling refreshed like Lhatsun when he was here although I'm not able to fly. We make a leisurely start, enjoying the warmth of the sun and the contrast with yesterday, and set off at 10 for Tortong down the valley. Quite soon the clouds over the mountains on the north side of the valley, the side we're walking down, begin to deposit hailstones. It's a four-hour walk down a relatively easy trail through rhododendron bushes and cedars that give way to rhododendron trees and tall pines. Close to Tortong a few small bamboo stands grow. The hail turns to rain as we descend.

Tortong consists of a single substantial farmstead. There's a new building made of hand-hewn and sawed wood and several older and smaller buildings, but only one family lives here. There's a hen and a pigeon but no other animals are visible. There's nothing growing but there is a plentiful supply of firewood. Surely the family can't support themselves just by serving trekkers?

The fire is the usual kind, in this case made from the frame of a chicken carrier surrounded by roughly shaped sheet metal. It provides little heat so I retreat to my tent, which, although unheated does not have drafts. It rains all afternoon so I spend it asleep, lying fully dressed under but not in my sleeping bag as a gesture towards some notion of proper etiquette.

Back at the house at the end of the afternoon for soup, vegetable momos and canned fruit I realize the family's income comes from yaks that are away foraging somewhere. Their existence is revealed by huge quantities of cheese hanging from the rafters, not in small cubes but six inch long strips an inch thick. The family appears to be Tibetan refugees. The woman is wearing the traditional striped apron and gray dress.

Over dinner I ask John what his friend did with F Sharp's bell. One of the porters found a bell without a clapper among the rhododendrons a few days ago and I want to believe it could be F Sharp's. John's friend did not de-clapper the bell, however. He only impounded it for the night and gave it to the yak herder's pretty daughter next day as she sat in her usual place on a yak rug combing her hair and posing for photographs.

## **Oct 28 (Tortong -> near Yamphudin)**

Daylight reveals Tortong to be almost as wet when it isn't raining as when it is. The valley is very narrow and the mountains very tall. There's a distinct line above which it snowed and below which it rained last night. The tree trunks are covered with moss as thick as the trunk itself, not just in the direction of the prevailing wind but equally thick all round, and festoons of Spanish moss hang from the branches. Nobody could live a healthy three score years and ten here.

John tells me about an English novelist pen-named Ernest Bramah who wrote, "*There are few situations in life that cannot be resolved promptly, and to the satisfaction of all concerned, by either suicide, a bag of gold, or thrusting a despised antagonist over a precipice on a dark night.*" Suicide seems the obvious course for anyone born in Tortong, but maybe it feels like heaven to rain-starved Tibetans.

In fact the little boy who lives here is friendly and cheerful and his older sister is also curious and self-sufficient. They're going on some errand in the same direction as us and walk with us most of the too-long day. The girl is well trained to be wary of males



and keeps a discrete distance but the boy chats with the porters. We spend three hours slogging up the slippery mountainside to Chitre, the site of a yak herder's summer camp, and after lunch beside a fire on which one of the porters keeps putting bamboo to explode, we make a four hour descent of all the height we gained and more, up and down some more, and at last we stop considerably further from Tortong than planned on a hillside a bit before Yamphudin, which we want to avoid because it's the Maoist headquarters for this area.

The descent from Chitre was paved with rough stone that's very hard on the knees but the most difficult part of today's trek was crossing three big landslides. Luckily that was before we reached Chitre so my knees were still strong. You really don't want to lose your balance crossing a landslide. It stayed dry all day but clouds obscured the view, which didn't matter because the only thing we could look at was the next place to step.

### **Oct 29 (near Yamphudin -> Mamangkhe)**

It's 6,800 feet here and the sun is already very hot at 8:30am but some cumulus is developing. There are lemons in the trees but I've only seen shaking branches. Today's objective is Phumphe, another six or seven hours walk, unless Rhesum finds a suitable pig somewhere along the way. We agreed he could roast a pig so the crew can celebrate Dasain.



The walk will again be up and down steep heavily forested hillsides so there'll be infrequent views. A reasonable schedule for Westerners is five or six days to get between the mountains and the trailhead/airstrip but Nepalis do it in half that time, fueled by huge plates of boiled rice lubricated with garlic and lentil soup, dhal bhat. My system craves more protein, however. Last night's vegetable quesadilla with six kinds of beans was very tasty but it yielded enough gas to light a small village for several days.

At these lower altitudes the vegetation and woodland look similar to what I'm used to although it's actually a mixture of grasses, shrubs and trees that also grow in New England along with others I don't recognize. Some trees are maples that have a more

sharply defined leaf than New England ones and a more twisted growth habit as if they were pained by the weather. Tonight's campsite is very thickly vegetated and damp; perfect for leeches, only one of which has so far penetrated my tent. It hid alongside my watchstrap and was just starting to feed when I felt it.

The morning's walk turns out to be much more enjoyable than yesterday's because the ups and downs are less extreme, it's mostly dry, and it's sunny. Several trees have very late orchids in flower. They usually flower in springtime.



Rhesum is obsessed with the pig roast and stops at every farmhouse to see if they have one. He found one half an hour ago and wanted to stop for the day in a completely impractical place so he could buy and immediately begin roasting it.

I've been tempted by the idea that my preference for climbing instead of descending is somehow related to *Paradise Lost*, that I sense I'm approaching closer to heaven when I climb. Closer self-study suggests a more prosaic explanation, however. Ascending requires only effort while descending involves both effort and pain.

We stop for a rest beside a small stream where there are several dragonflies and I wonder if anyone has ever measured their rate of acceleration. These are about an inch and a half long, dark brown with lime green rings all along their bodies. One will be hovering, then it will disappear to reappear immediately a couple of feet away hovering again. I have not seen it move. Their acceleration must be faster than the scan rate of the human ocular system. Either that or they've mastered teleportation.

Rhesum finds another pig after lunch so we camp at Mamangkhe, a bit before Phumphe.

### **Oct 30 (Mamankhe -> south of Phumphe)**

Everyone is exceptionally cheerful at 5:30 this morning, singing, whistling and laughing after last night's barbecue. Rhesum decided that roasting the pig whole was impractical and made a barbecue grill with green sticks.



This is a magnificent location high on the hillside on the outskirts of Mamangkhe with views across, up and down the valley. There's a small shop that's now locked up because of the Maoists. It used to sell beer, soda and snacks to trekkers. The only trekkers we saw yesterday were three profusely sweating men in their '50s who started that morning from Tortong and planned to catch the plane at Suketar today. As John said, if you do that, the only thing you see is your own two feet. There's no time for the fine views of forested hills with cardamom growing in the shade, the rich terraces, or the farmsteads. They won't have seen the eagle that soared close overhead yesterday.



A Maoist challenges us as we leave Mamangkhe, a girl of about twenty with a big pistol strapped to her thigh. I hand her our receipt and she studies it intently trying to find something wrong so she can get a donation but there is nothing wrong. Do you have binoculars, she asks? No, just cameras, we say. What about sunglasses? No, but Rhesum tells her he has several at home that he'll bring next time he comes. She gives up trying to get anything after ten minutes and has a friendly animated discussion with Dhiren, Reshum and Roshan. Everyone is all smiles when we part.

We lunch at Phumphe after a steep descent from Mamangkhe to the bottom of the valley and an equally steep and longer climb up the opposite hill to where we're now looking down on Mamangkhe's terraces to the north. We decide to stay here for the day because there's such a beautiful view, it's a sunny day and we have four days left to complete an easy three days' trek to Suketar.

Some of the books written about Tibet after the Chinese invasion marvel at how the wheel was unknown there until the 1950s as if that somehow demonstrates a stone age culture that survived into the atomic age, but you don't see wheeled vehicles anywhere I've been for the last month. You do see solar panels on the roofs because they're useful. The roads here are no more than four feet wide and so steep and slippery that wheeled vehicles are impractical. Tibet is flatter and they could have had wheeled vehicles, they used wheels for prayer machines that amplify and automate human prayers, but horses and yaks were simply better. Nestorian Christian missionaries in Tibet probably did have wheeled carts that functioned as movable cathedrals fifteen hundred years ago but the Tibetans felt no such need.

Western civilizations have changed enormously since they were agrarian barter economies like today's Himalayan communities but I can't make up my mind if they're

more advanced. Medicines are a true benefit but we die in the end, anyway. People here have plenty of time for chat, contemplation, or observation of others and that's not the case for most westerners today. I'm as puzzled as my grandfather Whalley was when his Mexican friend, Celedonio, asked why Americans work and live as they do. He worked until he had enough money for a day or two. Then he stopped. We all must live as we expect, though, and I couldn't be content with subsistence like these folks.

A party of German trekkers just arrived and this is a small site so they'll be less than ten feet from us. I must away to my tent.

### **Oct 31 (south of Pumpe -> Anpan)**

No more barbecued pig for me! Rhesum did it again last night and I woke many times with nightmares, reminding me of David's experience after I persuaded him to sample andouillette in Lyons. My first nightmare featured a small but spreading fire. The man who fetched the bucket of water to extinguish it flung the water, still inside the bucket, high onto the flat roof of a nearby apartment building, and the fire continued to grow. The next dream revolved around a way of testing electrical wiring installations by injecting water. Next I'd driven to an executive education class that didn't start until just before lunch, that required us to go for lunch to an inn several hours drive away, and then involved so much handing out of teaching materials and completion of forms that there was no time to start the lecture before the day ended. And so on. It's back to carbohydrates for me, a good clean fuel with manageable side effects.

I'm hiding from the Germans, sitting in my tent trying to remember words to extend my vocabulary beyond wienerchnitzel and Oktoberfest. The only things to surface so far have been Ich Bin Ein Berliner, which isn't helpful because I'm obviously not a donut, and Heil Hitler, which won't help me be unobtrusive.

When John was here after the Sep 11 attack there was tremendous sympathy for America even in the smallest villages. Now, four years into George II's despicable reign, we're not even allowed here. Perhaps we should burn dwarf rhododendron on Tuesday, the US election day, and pray very hard. John suggests a sacrifice as well.

We walk about three hours to Anpan at the summit of a ridge and camp for the day. If we'd gone another three hours to the next camping spot, we'd just end up a day early at Suketar, and this is another site with great views. It's 70F in the shade and much hotter in the sun so I've retired to my tent. There's a three sided stone hut a few feet away that houses four buffalo. A very young girl just un-tethered them and chased them out with a stick then five minutes later chased them back. The animals were thoroughly confused but the girl was in no doubt about her purpose, whatever it was.

Last night John asked what books I read when I was a teenager and I was surprised to find I couldn't remember what I read before I was 16 and started Aldous Huxley. I did a lot of homework but surely I must have read for pleasure, too. Since I remember so little of my years between eleven and sixteen I must have been more depressed than I'd thought. John's grandfather started him on Rider Haggard, Kipling and such and then accounts by explorers, diplomats, soldiers on leave in India, and so forth. He reckons that's the origin of his own desire to explore and wondered what had led to mine.

It's a fine sunny afternoon with a breeze since we're on top of a ridge, just what the Brits were seeking for their hill stations. I contemplate the views and start Njal's Saga but most of the time my mind is agreeably vacant.



After kidney bean soup, pumpkin curry and rice I feel clean again. When it grows dark a dog on the hill above us begins howling in a determined way but at less than full volume as if he knows he is in for a long session. It is in fact a long time before he gets any response. I passed a dog that growled when I was exploring this afternoon and I figured him for a barker but he is silent. At last other dogs begin to join in and eventually the hills resound.

### **Nov 1 (Anpan -> Khesewa)**

The Singalia Ridge is opposite my tent but that's to the east so the sun is behind it and the light isn't exciting for photography. It's 6:30 on another clear morning and we'll try to go further today, down the mountain and up the other side on Limbu Hill as John calls it in honor of the Limbu people who live there. We'll ask if there's another campsite on the far side of the ridge because John doesn't remember one.

Here at 6,000 feet there's plentiful bamboo and cardamom again. Most houses are high on the hillsides because the hours of sunlight are longer than down in the valley and they're less vulnerable to landslides. Maybe the better views are also a consideration. There's less water high up but every village and many houses have a supply delivered by long PVC pipes that snake over the hillsides. They're a lot more convenient than the traditional bamboo pipes. Some cardamom plantations have irrigation ditches to keep them damp and protect them in the monsoon season.



I explained 'personal space' to Dhiren today because I don't want him to think there's anything personal in my dislike of having him very close behind me on the trail. I explained how scientists discovered that a different amount of space is expected around people from different western countries so they won't feel threatened and that every western society has some expectation about how much space is personal and mustn't be invaded. There's no such concept in Nepal. Nobody minds having others close to them and if you're walking with a friend it's a pleasure to have them very close, perhaps with your arms round each others shoulders.

We stop for lunch at Karibanyang. It's another perfect day for trekking, for me, anyway, 80F with bright sun and a breeze. John, being an endomorph, prefers it much cooler and with no sun.

I'm starting to understand some feelings that are central to others' understanding of the world. I feel like a young man who has lived a very long time and maybe that's at the root of the belief in reincarnation. The experiences of my life feel potentially instructive and yet it's very hard to change and benefit from experience. It would be so much easier if one could start over again with the benefit of previous lifetimes' mistakes.

The pig eating was particularly instructive and I now understand the feeling that pig flesh is unclean and the related feeling that the body is a temple that can be polluted. The pig was barbecued over hot ashes from green wood, lying on a grill of green branches the first time and kebab style on bamboo splints the second. These pigs are fed on scraps and forage, not corn or other high growth foods and they taste more like game. The meat was thoroughly cooked but the skin was left soft. There was nothing wrong with it but it left me feeling I'd eaten something unclean and defiled myself. I didn't feel nauseous but that I'd let myself down.

One thing I still don't understand is the Buddhist feeling about meat eating. None of this crew is devout in the way some were in Sikkim. Nobody prays in the morning, for example, but I know Dhiren is a serious Buddhist and Rhesum says his family has always been Buddhist and he is, too. None of the others speaks enough English for me to find out what they believe. Everyone was enthusiastic about the pig and Dhiren went on eating the longest by a wide margin. He likes to eat two kilos at a sitting when he gets the chance although it must be roasted, not fried. Also, everyone was vastly entertained by Ram's account of his adventures trying to kill the pig. The stick he beat it with kept breaking and the pig kept running away.

The season is very late here this year. Millet is just starting to be harvested and the first fields are only now being plowed, elderberries are ripe along the trail, and some pumpkins are only just starting to swell.

Two young girls on their way home from school wish us namaste and give each of us a fresh cardamom to chew. I hoped it wasn't the Forbidden Fruit but made no comment.





Dr. John made another appearance soon after when we were stopped by a family coming up the trail. The mother was sick and did we have any medicine? What was wrong? A headache. How long had she had it? That proved harder to establish but it seemed she'd had it for two days and it was getting worse. Since John's first aid kit was in his bag with the porter we had to make do with the less comprehensive supply I'd bought in Kathmandu. Panadol was the only thing that might help but John's confident manner and imposing size, a sure indicator of success and competence, definitely did. As he said later, she could have been suffering from anything ranging from a brain tumor to the onset of menopause.

Today's campsite is the usual tiny field beside the trail. It's shaded by a large fig tree and several stands of bamboo. Just off the field is a two story thatched barn with three cattle and a calf in the area underneath, two in a lean-to at the side and a pig in a pen in front. Also under the barn is a device for pounding flour. There's a heavy wooden beam pivoted like an off-center seesaw and you stand on its short end. The longer end has a pestle underneath and when you step off, this pounds down into a hole in the bedrock where the grain is placed.

Uphill from the barn a buffalo with splendid curved horns lives under a bamboo shelter. Set back from the trail is a house that's larger than usual and colorfully painted. As soon as we arrive we attract the usual flock of small children one of whom, a very small girl of about five, has her tiny sister strapped to her back. As I lie in my tent after dinner I think I hear a bullfrog but it is a dog with a speech defect barking at the moon.



## **Nov 2 (Khesewa -> Tembewa)**

The only animals conveniently to hand when I remember it's Election Day are two small children. More than enough human life has already been sacrificed on George II's deranged crusade so I spare them and make do without prayer aids.

Limbu Hill was announced prematurely. We're climbing it today not yesterday. Just before we set off, four middle-aged French people pass, two couples. One of the men is being carried by a porter and has been for the last five days. He became nauseous on Sileli La, which is about a thousand feet lower than Lapsang La, which we used, and he can't even keep water down. It's altitude sickness, and sometime in the next few days he'll die because the circulation to his brain has been impeded too long. They're on an independent trek with a few porters they hired individually and they have no travel insurance so they couldn't get a rescue helicopter.

I asked John how many of the crew he thinks would say they're Buddhist. *"This is Nepal,"* he replied. *"It doesn't work like that. Most people practice a mixture of Buddhism, Hinduism and more primitive beliefs."* I remembered him pointing out Pathibhara, which overlooked our campsite a couple of days ago. There's a temple at its summit where Dhiren says they perform over 5,000 animal sacrifices a year.

According to Nepalese scholars, the pagoda was invented in Nepal because four thousand years ago animals used to be burned after they were sacrificed. A way was needed to keep rain from putting out the altar fire despite the hole in the roof to let smoke escape. The answer was a second roof over top of the one with the hole.



Harvested grain

I've adjusted as easily and completely to twelve hours of sleep a day as I did to five when I worked in New York. I wonder how much would be possible?

Dhiren, who is studying for his college degree, says education is a poison here. Three hundred thousand people graduate from school each year and only a tiny few can get jobs in the army and police. The others can't get any job that uses their education so they get frustrated with the government and go off to join the Maoists in the jungle.

There were small puffs of cumulus over the whole sky first thing this morning that later coalesced into a few large clouds over the highest ridges. It was 70F in the shade but most of this morning's trek was in the bright sun where it's much hotter. We caught up with the French group at tonight's campsite and the sick man was looking much more



alert. It wasn't altitude sickness after all but a stomach bug. The porter who's been carrying him was also looking happier.

Tonight's campsite is very busy. As well as the French there are New Zealanders and Brits on the way to Suketar and a group that's all English. They're starting a three-week trek in the opposite direction from ours and north from Ghunsa. It's very unlikely the weather will stay good enough and most of them are on the wrong side of fifty, and unfit.

As usual the trekkers are a powerful draw for the locals, one of whom spends a long time bending over and washing her feet at the central water supply, which enables her to reveal her ample cleavage, coyly adjust her sari, and repeat. It seems peculiar to us now that the silly girls in Jane Austen's stories are mad about soldiers because soldiers are so obviously disreputable, but it's easier to understand in these remote communities where everyone's life is the same and nothing exciting happens. Any stranger would be attractive. But these strangers are disappointing; none responds.

This was the day Dhiren wanted me to tell him the story of Paradise Lost and I'd had several days to think about it so we both enjoyed the tale. Dhiren then told me that in his Rai culture the first human was a woman. God saw she was lonely and had nothing to do so, using just the power of his mind, he impregnated her, she had a child and that was the origin of the human race. Women have had plenty to do ever since.

After dinner Rhesum tells one of his stories. This one is about why at the start of one of his treks he gave every porter enough money to buy a kukri and told them each to cut themselves a big stick. He had trekked in the same place the previous year. It was the haunt of a famous robber and the robber came to their campsite before dark pretending to be drunk but really sizing them up. Reshum sent one of the boys to fetch the police but they were many hours away.

The robber came back at midnight brandishing two kukris and demanding money from everyone, money or sex from the females. All the porters immediately ran away but Reshum could not leave his clients. He had no weapon and if he fought the robber he would be killed so he picked up a big stone and jumped on a wall. If the robber came close and didn't see him maybe he could crash the stone down on his head. One of the trekkers, a young Englishman, seized a heavy stick when the robber wasn't looking and gave him a tremendous blow behind the knees. The robber fell to the ground and Reshum leaped on him and bound his arms and legs behind his back, then lost his temper and began beating the robber with his fists. He wanted to kill him but his clients pulled him away. A compromise was reached and every porter lined up to give the robber one blow with leg or arm.

In the morning the police came and manacled the robber, who by then had decided Reshum was to blame for his capture. *"I am twenty two,"* he said as the police took him away. *"If I am in jail another twenty two years I will come for you when I get out."* Reshum laughed and told him, *"You'll never get out. You'll die in jail."* But the robber had 65,000 rupees and much gold hidden away and was able to bribe the police, so three days later he was free again.

The next year when Reshum had to camp again in the same area he was very scared and that's why he bought kukris for all his crew. His clients wanted to know why everyone was so heavily armed and he told them he was being very careful because they would pass through an area where wild animals had been seen. A year and a half later someone caught the robber, cut off his arms and legs and killed him.

### **Nov 3 (Tembewa -> Suketar)**

This morning we pass a family each of whom is carrying a load of fibrous tree bark to Suketar where it will be shipped to Kathmandu and manufactured into paper. In historic times treeless Tibet traded salt for Nepalese paper. Tibetan manuscripts can now be dated and the exact origin of the paper determined from its pollen content.

Later we come to a small settlement where the Pathibhara trail goes off to the north. Pathibhara means full pot, a heaping measure, because of the mountain's shape, and there are numerous Patibharas in Nepal but this is the famous one with the temple. As we continue towards Suketar we meet many pilgrims taking goats and other animals to be sacrificed there. The meat will be cooked and they'll take it back to their villages and share it with those who couldn't come. All the goats are very small. Most of them trot beside the pilgrims with misplaced trust but a few are so tired they must be carried, some of them slumped across the shoulders of young children who I hope are at least ambivalent about the way the pilgrimage will end.

When we reach Suketar, Reshum calls his office in Kathmandu. There's a message that he should go home as soon as possible. They don't want to tell him why but he insists and is told his father died two days ago. He's very upset. Even if he can get a seat on tomorrow's flight to Biratnagar he'll be too late for the funeral. His father was 75 but he was always strong and healthy, he got up at 3 every morning and was always busy. He looked after Reshum's land as well as his own. He came to Pokhara to see Reshum and tell him something just before this trek but Reshum was in Kathmandu and by the time he got home his father had gone. Before he left he gave Reshum's wife some jewelry. Reshum had a feeling something wasn't right ever since he had a dream when we were at Ghunsa. His father had gathered all Reshum's ancestors and relatives together and was saying goodbye to them because he was going away.

Later in the afternoon a rescue helicopter touches down to drop off a hundred gallons of fuel in five gallon containers so it can refuel on its way from picking up a man at Hellok. It turns out the pilot knows one of Reshum's brothers so, with the blessing of the sick man, he's able to hitch a ride direct to Kathmandu when it comes back.

We spend the night in the Hotel Kanchenjunga, sleeping in the best bedroom, the one with the altar. One should sleep with head facing the altar but the beds are placed against the walls so we sleep irreverently.

### **Nov 4 (Suketar -> Kathmandu)**

Suketar was cold and windy yesterday but it's warm and still this morning. The plane is due at 8:15am before the wind gets up, but flight schedules are only tentative up here. The soldiers who protect the airstrip from the Maoists have completed their morning exercises on the airstrip, some are digging holes, perhaps to beef up the fortifications, and others are splitting firewood. I'm having a very hard time coming to terms with the fact that, knowing beyond any doubt what he is, my fellow citizens have voted to elect George II. There's no doubt about the result this time, it's a real majority.

The plane arrives at 9:45. The landing strip slopes up at one end and there's a precipice at the other. We board and the plane taxis to the very top of the slope, then barrels



towards the precipice with engine screaming, buffeted from side to side by the wind that has by now developed and yawing violently fore and aft over the rough ground. The passengers cheer loudly when we become airborne for the last time. I notice the hills south of Taplejung are actively terraced and the plains further south intensely cultivated so I must have been mistaken when I thought I saw abandoned terraces last year.



It's a long wait in hot, crowded Biratnagar. I try to read Njal's Saga but in these conditions it's impossible to imagine life in Iceland. We know when it's time to go through security to the departure area because a man yells something incomprehensible but very loud about twenty minutes before our scheduled departure. There's an exceptionally clear view of the mountains on the flight to Kathmandu but I foolishly didn't think about the direction we'd be flying and picked a seat on the left that gives me a fine view in the opposite direction.

My first action when we get back to the Hotel Garuda is a long shower. The water never progresses from off-cold to warm but still it's wonderful, then I hand over all my laundry, a splendid \$6 investment, go out and email that I'm back safely, buy scissors to trim my mustache so I can feed unimpeded again, and then lie down for what feels like a well earned rest. We've arranged to eat at 6, the time we usually ate on the trek, and I'm very keen for the intervening hour to pass because the crew left to catch their bus at 4 this morning and we had no breakfast. My only food all day has been an elderly Powerbar that I've been carrying for the last month for just such an emergency.

## **Nov 5 (Kathmandu)**

We go to the airport and to my amazement my lost bag is there. It arrived from India on Oct 9. On the way back as our taxi jostles through the cars, trucks, motorbikes and people in varying numbers of lanes John observes that the Nepali approach to driving reflects their lack of need for personal space. Then after a caffeine fix at the Northfield Café he conducts me on a tour of jewelry stores and helps me negotiate a satisfactory price for chokers and pendants for Felicity, silver because it suits her and because it's worked here so it supports the economy more than gold, which is mainly manufactured

in India. It's yet another sunny day and Thamel is now heavily populated by western tourists. A month ago there were very few because the season hadn't quite started.

At Pilgrims while John went to have his beard shaved off I found books on land ownership in Nepal and terrace agriculture. I also went to the antique store to look for a bell to go with the Tibetan dorje I bought last year but discovered I wasn't quite sure what I was looking for. Do those bells have a clapper? I decided to go back to Pilgrims and try to find a photograph.

## **Nov 6 (Kathmandu)**

I sort my stuff into two piles, things I'll leave at the hotel for the next trek and things I'll take home. I'll go through it again later and make a list so I'll know what not to bring next time. John says my heavy boots would be good for climbing glaciers but only with crampons because the soles are rigid. They're not really practical in any other conditions. I'll leave them here in the hope we'll eventually get to North Sikkim.

After breakfast we go to the Tibetan craft center in Patan and then to Durbar Marg, which is excellently preserved and fascinating. We find no carpets we like so next we scour Thamel. I get three small Tibetan carpets for the boys and one for the chair in my study. After long negotiation John gets a larger carpet he's fallen in love with and three smaller ones, all for about 75% of the asking price. Then he goes back to the hotel to recover and I make a final visit to Pilgrims. The only thing I still have to do is go back to the antique store to get the Tibetan bell.



Patan

## **Nov 7 (Kathmandu -> Doha and home)**

I'm surprised to hear a woman in the throes of passion on the fire escape outside when I wake then realize it's a dove talking to itself. John and I go for an early breakfast because he has an early flight and we tell each other we'll meet again in Kathmandu, Vienna or who knows where and when, then I return to the Tibetan antique store,



where I end up buying a considerably more expensive bell than I'd intended, its matching dorje, and a dagger for getting rid of bad spirits.

'Phurba' is the Tibetan name for ritual daggers. Mine, like most, is bronze but some are made of beautifully carved ivory. It's the lama's sorcery that makes daggers effective but some of the lama's power is said to remain with the dagger and they become more powerful the more they're used. Alexandra David-Neel got one because of this belief. She met some lamas who were taking a phurba to a remote cave. It belonged to their master and since his death it was causing great trouble. Two monks who touched it had died, one fell off his horse and broke his leg, and the monastery flagpole snapped and fell. When the lamas enclosed the phurba in a box strange noises were heard from inside and they remembered one that flew through the air killing men and animals.

David-Neel suggested they leave it with her overnight and took it away from the campsite to think how to persuade them to let her keep it. After she was there several hours she noticed someone creeping towards the phurba. She grabbed it and rushed back to camp to see who had been tempted but nobody had moved. She told the lamas what happened and they said, *"Surely that was our Grand Lama! He wanted to take back his phurba and perhaps he would have killed you if he had succeeded. ... [He] was a powerful magician; yet he could not take his phurba away from you. Keep it now, keep it and it will no longer do harm to anyone."* She was easily persuaded.

Dhiren calls while I'm doing my final packing – I've bought a lot more books than I thought since returning to Kathmandu – and we arrange to meet at 1pm. He's had to take his wife to the hospital but she still wants to meet me so he'll take me there and then on to the airport. Having too little time now to visit the Monkey Temple and too much to just sit in the Garuda I go and check email again. It's so good to hear from the boys. Then I make the mistake of visiting a bookstore I haven't been in before. To keep myself from further temptation I go to the Northfield for a hamburger and fries.

Dhiren brings a pashmina scarf for Felicity and a picture of Buddha and a prayer wheel for me. I ask where I can get a tape of his music – John told me last night that Dhiren had made a recording – and he says it's not in the shops any more but he'll send me one. Then we get a taxi to the hospital. His wife is in pain intermittently but smiling the rest of the time. Her two younger sisters are with her and we chat as much as their English allows. The middle sister has a six year old and the youngest is a student. Dhiren proudly says she's first in her class.

When it's time for me to leave for the airport he gives his wife a bouquet of flowers that I assume are for her but she presents them to me, wishing me a safe journey home. I'm so surprised that I don't immediately understand. Then it seems impractical to carry them on my 36 hour series of flights and I won't be allowed to bring them into the US anyway, so I quietly ask Dhiren if it would be OK for me to give the flowers to his wife. He thinks for a moment and then emphatically says it wouldn't, they're for me, and quickly shepherds me away. When we're in the taxi I tell him I really like the flowers and thought his wife would like them when she's alone in the hospital. I hope I wasn't ungracious but he had a silk scarf that I think he must have intended as a khata to put round my neck at the airport in the traditional gesture of good luck for a journey. He left it in the taxi when we parted.

So now I'm part way into the first of many waits and flights on my tortuous way home. I've checked my bag through to New York and verified its labels, and I'm in the Kathmandu international departure lounge where there's only one boarding gate because there are so few flights. There's a party of Brits who contort their bodies into

self-deprecating off-balance positions and their faces into peculiar grimaces when they interact with each other. Brits were instantly recognizable on the trek because no other nationality moves with the same vigorous awkwardness. The program on the large plasma TVs in the lounge is a full-length documentary about pig farming.

My next wait is after the five hour flight to Doha, a very new and clean airport filled with fashionable jewelry, plentiful gold, shabby but dignified Nepalis coming to work in the Arab countries, western businessmen in suits and Arabs in spotless white robes. The Nepalis are entirely comfortable just as they would be anywhere else even though this must be utterly different from anything they've experienced before.

Among the airport amenities are a Women's Prayer Room and one for men. The women's area is being used as a lounge by a couple of dozen women and three men looking at the departures screen. In the men's rest room half a dozen waist-high shower-heads are ranged along one wall with a sign saying they're to be used only for washing feet and legs.

I return to the gate to wait for my Bahrain flight and read a few more pages of Kim Stanley Robinson's "Escape from Kathmandu".



Bonus shot of me and John on Lapsang La taken by Dhiren with John's camera