

Roof of the World

Travels in Nepal

Mark Moxon





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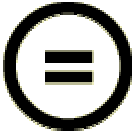
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Foreword

This book is a collection of writing from the road, covering a one-month trip I made to Nepal in 1998. This was part of a much larger, three-year journey that took me through Australia, New Zealand, French Polynesia, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, India and Nepal, from 1995 to 1998.

The travelogue for all these countries and more can be found at my personal website at www.moxon.net, where you can also find travel tips, recommended journeys and further free books for you to download. If you enjoy reading this book, then I'd be delighted if you would sign my website's Guestbook.

I've released this book and its companions via a Creative Commons Licence, which means you are free to distribute it to everyone and anyone, as long as you distribute it on a non-commercial basis and make no changes to it. If you know someone who might like this book, please pass it on; I make no money from it, but I do enjoy the thought of people reading it and recommending it to their friends.

Finally, please be aware that this book is highly satirical, which means there's a slight chance that it might cause offence those who think my sense of

humour is amusing as a puddle of mud. On top of this, some parts will be out of date – which is why each article is dated – and others will betray the naivety of a traveller who discovered his way in the world by throwing himself into it headfirst. It is, however, an honest account of how I felt as I travelled the world for three years, and as such, I hope you enjoy it.

Mark Moxon, September 2004

www.moxon.net

Map



The Himalayas

Annapurna Circuit

Written: 22 April 1998

Nepal freaked me out instantly, in much the same way the cool, silent night air does as you leave the rock concert, ears still ringing. Compared to the hustle and bustle of India, Nepal felt like a quiet backwater: the fact that I had to put my watch forward by exactly fifteen minutes at the border only emphasised the differences between India and the kingdom of mountains to the north.

Even the long bus ride from the Indian border at Sunauli to the mountain town of Pokhara was easy, and the loud horns so ubiquitous in India were conspicuous by their absence. As I recalled the admonition that after India anywhere would appear mundane, I realised that mundane isn't always so bad; after all, sitting in a comfy chair in front of the fire and flicking channels is pretty mundane, but after a long day trekking through the fire and ice of the real world, it's a dream.

Indeed trekking was my goal in Nepal, and that's why I headed straight for Pokhara instead of Kathmandu. The Annapurna Conservation Area to the north of Pokhara, itself in the western half of Nepal,

contains some of the most dramatic trekking on this planet, and I had my sights firmly fixed on the three-week Annapurna Circuit, a circular route that crosses a very high pass, trundles down the deepest gorge in the world, and provides mountain views to stifle breath that's already short in the high altitude of the Himalayas. After beaches, rainforests, deserts, volcanoes and glaciers, it was time for the big cheese.

The Himalayas are, of course, huge, but reading about them is considerably different from experiencing them first hand. On a trek like this there are not only the usual walkers' concerns of blisters, twisted ankles, upset stomachs and sunburn, but also Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS), an ailment brought on by high altitude that is fatal if unchecked, and still claims trekkers' lives today. On the surface, the Annapurna Circuit sounds like the biggest challenge of them all.

It isn't all challenge, though, and this is a major part of its appeal. Unlike most of the trekking I'd done up to this point, you don't need to carry food because you stop in villages along the way, staying in the local hotels. This also means you don't need to carry a tent, cooker, fuel or any of the other niceties associated with self-sufficient tramping, leaving the pack pleasantly light and the accommodation comfortable. On a three-week trek this is a godsend: the thought of a pack laden with 21 days of survival gear is enough to make most

people's knees spring a leak in sympathy.

It also meant that I had to reappraise my attitude towards tramping. So often I have been on tramps that require serious effort and long days to get to destinations – Taman Negara, Hollyford-Pyke, Gunung Rinjani to name but three – that I've developed a bit of an attitude problem. I like to go fast, to push myself, to get fit, to be first at the destination, and in Annapurna this isn't just a waste of the ambience of the village inns and the beauty of the mountain views, it's foolhardy. One way to avoid AMS is to acclimatise slowly to altitude, so hooning up the peaks is simply dumb. Altitude soon altered my attitude.

Annapurna Statistics

The Annapurna Circuit is basically a loop, normally walked anti-clockwise, that circles round the east-west Annapurna mountain range, starting and ending at Pokhara to the south of the range. These mountains are huge, the tallest, Annapurna I, reaching 8091m (26545 ft), a height approaching that of Everest's 8848m (29028 ft). The track doesn't quite reach such dizzying heights, but the 202km (125 mile) walk has a fairly hefty high point at its northern tip: the Thorung La pass, at 5416m (17769 ft) just under two-thirds of Everest's altitude. The highest I had ever been before tackling the Annapurna track was 3726m (12224 ft) on Lombok's

Gunung Rinjani, but the Thorung La pass is nearly half as high again, and it feels it.

The pass neatly slices the track into two halves: from Pokhara to Thorung Phedi, which takes you up to the east side of the pass; and the track from Muktinath back down to Pokhara on the west side of the pass, popularly known as the Jomsom Trek and commonly walked by those unwilling to tackle the pass.

In 1993/4, 5898 walkers headed up the eastern side; in the first half of 1997, 18.1 per cent of those walkers were from the UK, 11.4 per cent from Germany, 11.3 per cent from the US and 9.7 per cent from France. Conversely, on the western side there were 15822 walkers in 1996/7, of which 13.7 per cent were from the UK, 12.7 per cent from Germany, 10.5 per cent from France and 9.2 per cent from the US. The pass sure puts people off, and because the west side is more luxurious than the east, hardly anyone just does the east, as shown by the fact that there are three times as many walkers on the Jomsom as on the Circuit.

And those walkers doing the whole Circuit will pass through 73 villages in 90 hours of walking, with 540 hotels to choose from with a total of 5218 beds. Annapurna means business.

Annapurna Trekking and AMS

‘A lover without indiscretion is no lover at all’ read the

poster in the tea shop a few days into the trail, and the total nonsense of the message seemed quite in keeping with the contradictions I saw around me. Slashing a route through the deepest mountain valleys, the Annapurna Circuit passes through villages that used to be almost invisible, but which now sport signs in English, shops selling western luxuries, hotels with hot showers and even international telephone booths for those people who can't resist intruding on the outside world. The Annapurna Circuit isn't known as the Apple Pie Trail and the Coca-Cola Circuit for nothing.

This type of trekking has its ups and downs in more than just the literal sense. The impact of tourism on this erstwhile netherworld is plain to see: piles of bottles lie cracking in the searing sun, candy wrappers litter a number of the paths and the local culture is hard to separate from the service industries of hotel and restaurant. On the plus side, though, income is higher, ecological awareness is increasing, and the litter problem is nothing compared to India or Indonesia, an impressive feat when you consider the sheer numbers of people involved.

The Circuit also has an image problem among hardcore trekkers, who see it as more of a long stroll than a serious challenge. Trekkers who are more at home in waist-deep swamps and leech-infested tropical rainforests call it the 'milk and honey trek' because of

all the luxuries you encounter on the way – shops, real beds, bottled water and so on – and indeed Peter, with whom I'd trekked in Sulawesi, had described the Circuit as more of a collection of day walks than a real trek. In a sense he was right because most of the days are fairly short in terms of time and distance, but I would dismiss the comments of the walking junkies completely: I found the Annapurna Circuit a phenomenal challenge, though perhaps for different reasons than normal.

With such a walk one doesn't walk alone, even if one initially sets out on a solo trek. The groups I joined kept changing as various people went at different speeds or succumbed to the demands of the trek, but the main people were spot on. There were Clare and Anne, sisters from Vancouver; Jakob from Denmark; Bob from Cleveland, Ohio, a veteran 13-year traveller; Sheldon from Australia; and a whole spectrum of other characters to liven the mix. Sharing walks, something I tend not to do, is a good thing when your nightly stops are in hotels, and it struck me early on that Annapurna was made to be shared.

Another thing to share is paranoia about AMS. If you could take a man from sea level and transport him to the top of Everest¹ then he would be in a coma after two minutes, and dead after four. The reason is a

¹ This is currently impossible because helicopters don't have enough air at that height to operate and aeroplanes can't land on craggy peaks.

combination of the lack of oxygen and the low atmospheric pressure at that height; on Thorung La the atmospheric pressure is half that of sea level, and the partial pressure of oxygen (i.e. the amount of oxygen in the air) is a third of that at sea level, as oxygen is heavier than nitrogen. The result is that without slow acclimatisation people can die from AMS on the Annapurna Circuit, and they do, although not in high numbers (about one in 30,000 trekkers).

This sort of challenge provides an astounding amount of food for thought for trekkers whiling away the hours in their hotel restaurants. In a display of group psychosis that is rarely seen outside village gossip groups, AMS became the subject of the moment. Every other question seemed to be ‘Do you have a headache? Are you on Diamox? How many acclimatisation walks have you done today?’ It would have been boring if there hadn’t been so many conflicting opinions as to the truth behind AMS.

AMS is still a bit of a mystery, even though scientists know exactly why it happens and how to prevent it. The difficulty is that everyone seems to react differently to increased altitude: some might be able to go all the way from 300m to 5500m in a day without any symptoms, and some will die if they do the same. The guidelines are simple, though: when you get to 3000m you should only ascend 300m in each day, you

should try to go on an acclimatisation walk to a higher point than your sleeping height, and at the sign of any symptoms you should stop ascending and, if they don't go away or get worse, go down. Descent is the only cure, and the recommended drug, Diamox, is only an aid to quicker acclimatisation, not a cure.

It's even trickier, though, because the symptoms of AMS are a headache, reduced appetite and nausea, a loss of good humour, a congestive cough, and in serious AMS, ataxia (wobbly legs) and vomiting. These symptoms are fairly common on all long walks, with their exhausting days, uncomfortable beds and dubious food, so the paranoia runs rife, and with the temperatures well below freezing on the higher parts of the track, you have to wonder if your headache is from the icy blasts of wind freezing your ears off, or genuine AMS.

But *what* a beautiful place to walk...

Annapurna Circuit (Stage 1)

Written: 22 April 1998

Initially I was less concerned with getting AMS and more worried about an old friend. On the fourth day into the trek I felt a familiar stirring in my stomach, got those old eggy-belch blues, and realised that good old *giardia* had come back.

I took an extra day loafing around feeling miserable, before managing to walk up to the village of Chame where the hospital – a rickety old building rather mysteriously perched on top of a steep hill that would put off all but the most determined of the sick – gave me a week’s course of metronidazole, the third drug I’d end up using to try to kill off the bastard (the other two being Secnil and Flagyl).

The metronidazole certainly seemed to work, stopping the symptoms, but it had the added side effect of knocking me out; metronidazole is firmly in the ‘don’t operate machinery’ category, and as the week’s course lasted until just over the pass, I spent a lot of the ascent buzzing from something other than altitude.

We also lost Jakob to a mysterious stomach illness, and heard plenty of other stories of people getting ill on the trek. For some reason the Annapurna area is home to a bewildering array of nasty ailments, and this is why I class the track as difficult: trekking with a dodgy stomach and AMS is a bloody nightmare. And irrespective of whether you get trekker’s stomach or AMS, the high altitude means you get out of breath after just a few steps and have to rest a ridiculous amount. It makes the hardcore trekkers quite depressed: hills they would normally conquer before breakfast take all morning to walk up, however strong they are at sea level. Man just wasn’t meant to fly.

But the trek is well worth all this medical trauma. From the lush lakeside town of Pokhara you travel along valleys that become increasingly steep and desolate as the altitude lowers the temperature and the treeline approaches. Every day the huge peaks of the various ranges lean closer and closer, looming over tiny settlements where houses are cobbled together out of yak dung and shaky cement.

On the Track

Sights along the way are uniquely Nepalese. Lines of grey donkeys wend their way along the thin footpaths, each decorated with garish bridles and low-toned bells, swiftly followed by wiry men wielding split sticks and yelling, 'Ho!' A little boy points cow eyes up at us as he points to his badly cut toe, which we dutifully clean and bandage, suggesting to him in English that he really should wear some shoes while it heals, a piece of medical advice that disappears into the language barrier. Further along the trail is the town of Bagarchap, home to two disasters of recent memory: a landslide that destroyed the town in November 1995, taking a number of trekkers and locals with it to whom there are memorials dotted around the town; and my explosion of *giardia*. Here the locals are still rebuilding what once must have been a beautifully picturesque little town, and I spent a recuperative afternoon riveted to the verandah

table watching the women carry huge baskets of stones on their heads as the men broke up massive boulders into smaller, more manageable rocks for rebuilding their porch; throughout the whole job the workers smiled, laughed and joked in a way that's worryingly absent from the western workplace today.

And if I thought my backpack was a little too heavy as we scratched our way up yet another steep mountain path, Nepalese porters kept plying up and down the track carrying incredible weights in baskets suspended on their backs by a strap around the forehead, supporting the whole weight with their neck muscles. I thought the porters in Indonesia were pretty impressive, but the Nepalese are even more iron willed. The amazing energy of the locals is most apparent in the hotels and footpaths that form the Annapurna Circuit. Gaping yawns in the mountains have been filled with row upon row of flat rocks to form pathways; sheer granite cliffs have been chipped away or blown up to give a clear passage; stone steps have been set into the mountain sides to ease the ascents and descents; suspension bridges arc across steep-sided gorges from towers built from rock and cement. But the hotels are even more amazing, with their restaurants, dormitories and hot shower systems; although the food is pretty lame compared to places like Pokhara and Bangkok, it's a refreshing change to have to live on a potato and

porridge diet after such a long love-hate relationship with rice and noodles.

Actually, the impressive thing about the food isn't so much the taste, it's the fact that so many ingredients have to be carried in. There are no roads around the area, and yet hotels manage to feed up to 70 hungry mouths at a time, which might not make that potato soup the most thrilling culinary experience in the cosmos, but it does deserve a round of applause. I still fantasized about steak and beer and had to make do with a lot less, but it had to be better than the awful crud I normally cook for myself on the trail. Another interesting result of the porters carrying everything in is that prices go up as you get further away from Pokhara. That Mars bar you paid Rs40 for in Kathmandu is Rs80 just before the pass; a cup of hot lemon from the last tea house before the pass, shivering well above the snowline, will set you back a princely Rs40 compared to Rs5 down at more atmospheric restaurants; plain rice rockets from Rs10 to Rs50, because it's so heavy to carry; even Coke, the universal price index, leaps from Rs15 to Rs60, which sounds outrageous until you consider how far it's had to travel.

This price change seems to mirror the trip itself; the pass is such a momentous occasion that the Circuit naturally falls into the days before the pass, and the days after the pass. As you approach the pass the prices go

up, the temperature goes down, the trees shrink and eventually disappear, the snow gets closer, the air gets thinner and the landscape gets bleaker and bleaker. By the time you reach the first acclimatisation town, Manang at 3535m (11597 ft), life is getting harder: mild AMS, which affects most people at this stage, creates an ache at the base of the neck, makes breathing more difficult and walking up the street a serious exercise, and the temperature at night means sleeping is that much more unpleasant.

I found that a major portion of my AMS paranoia was taken up with a serious increase in cynicism: I began to have a major problem with walkers who weren't in my small list of Excellent People (though, of course, I kept this to myself). The silly Canadian whose Calgary accent made my eyes roll to the ceiling and my air-starved lungs let out an exasperated sigh; the know-it-all Englishman who came up with useless idiocies such as, 'I've had *giardia* three times and all I do is miss a meal and it goes away,' and who earned the nickname Jesus from the other walkers, a sarcastic comment on his seeming omniscience; the Squeaky American who reminded me of that pathetic character in *Police Academy*; the girls from North Carolina who didn't know the rules of chess ('Tell me y'all, how many of these liddle pahwns do y'all start with, now?') and who had an incredible lack of knowledge when it came to

accents of the rest of the world ('Are y'all Australian?' 'No, we are from Germany'); the doped-out American college student who kept exclaiming how cool the Diamox hit was, buzzin' fingertips 'n' all, man; the insane Rasputin clone from Switzerland with his zany sense of humour²; they all made me think of a particularly far out episode of the *Twilight Zone*.

But there was one thing that bound all of us together, weirdoes and cynics alike, and that was the continuing group psychosis. As mentioned, AMS was by far the most popular subject, but other obsessions cropped up with increasing regularity: the height of the current town (in dispute because every map has a different figure on it); the times for walking a certain portion of the track (also at variance, depending on your source); the quality of the food; the pros and cons of

² Two of whose jokes must be saved for posterity, because it's rare that I come across jokes so devoid of any humour that they couldn't even raise a smile on a terminally stoned *sadhu*. Try out the following corker:

One day I was sitting in a shopping centre, and a fly came buzzing up to me, so I caught this fly and put it into a paper bag that I had. Then I walked around the shopping centre and went to a supermarket, where I joined the queue. When I got to the till the lady asked me: 'What is this?'

'It's my fly,' I replied!

Seriously, you were supposed to laugh! How about this blockbuster, then:

When I was young the teacher asked the class, 'Now children, what do you want for Christmas?' When it came to my turn, I said: 'An elephant!'

The Taste Police have been informed.

Ibuprofen as an anti-inflammatory; the advantages of a genuine Gore-Tex jacket over a fake one from Kathmandu; the amazing price of a pot of coffee in that last village; the best way to treat blisters; and so on and so on. You can approach anyone on the Annapurna Circuit and enter into an instant conversation on aches, pains, drugs, food and gradients, but try to delve too deeply into politics or finances and you'll soon find yourself drifting back to the subjects of aches, pains, drugs, food and, let's not forget, gradients...

The local culture, tainted though it obviously is, changes markedly through the different regions too. From the touristy lower regions of the east side and the rugged wind-ravaged desolation of the northern reaches to the holiday-home mentality of the Jomsom track on the west of the pass, it's possible to peer into a way of life that is as authentic as Schrödinger's cat: your very investigation changes things. The monasteries dotted around the valleys dispense Buddhist and Hindu blessings to walkers, be they Indian *sadhus* or Australian accountants, and although the gompas are undeniably authentic, their collections of dusty Dalai Lama pictures and meditating Buddha statues ensure a continuous tourist trade, fired up by the antics of Richard Gere and a continuing mysticism surrounding Tibet.

I was blessed in two gompas, once in Braga on the

east side of the pass, and once in Muktinath just after the pass, and although it was a fascinating insight into the surreal nature of the eastern religions – idolatry meets nihilism – it felt like I was encroaching on territory reserved for true believers.

As the mumbling monk in Braga chanted mantras that sounded more like the contented sighs of an old man sitting by the fire, the prayer wheels whirled and the incense smouldered, but did the wisdom of Lord Buddha fill me with foreknowledge of the passage through the pass, for which I was receiving blessing? And did the whirling dances of the Hindu priest in Muktinath make the whole experience of *puja* any less theatrical? Of course not: I watched, listened, washed myself in the 108 taps round the temple (a guarantee of going to heaven, by the way), received the forehead markings and ate the crystalline sugar, and left with pictures rather than *puja*. Even the eternal flame of Muktinath turned out to be a scientific event: natural gas escapes through a vent that's always lit, not so much a Light that Never Goes Out as a Gas Bill that Never Gets Charged.

Over the Top

For crossing the pass I teamed up with Bob and Sheldon: the Canadian girls had forged on a day ahead, but we wanted to take our time acclimatising and stayed

longer at lower altitudes. Jakob had already fallen by the wayside, but apart from that we'd managed to make a good team, and as such we'd been bouncing the paranoia off each other like a prism magnifying sunlight. By the time the altitude reached the point of AMS, I was riding high on a wave of hypochondria.

We'd done our acclimatisation walks, where you walk 200m or so higher than the place where you will sleep, thus aiding the metabolic changes that need to take place in acclimatisation (such as lowering body acid levels, which means excessive urination as the acids are flushed out; an expansion of lung volume and a deepening of lung capacity; and a loss of appetite followed by slight nausea). But nothing prepared me for the sheer panic of altitude that made my last night on the east side a nightmare to remember.

It is simply freezing up there on the side of the pass. Sunlight helps, but as soon as the sun dips below the horizon the temperature shoots below freezing. Snowfall is not uncommon, and winds whistling through the cracks are a common feature. AMS, by this stage, has become a familiar friend, the slow pale throb of white noise at the back of your head, a migraine in the making, threatening to turn into something more serious at any time; appetite has all but disappeared, and every meal time is a struggle against instinct; simply walking up a short flight of stairs is an exercise in breathing steadily

and resting frequently; and dehydration from the diuretic effect of acclimatisation takes its toll, especially late at night as the symptoms get worse. On my last night before the pass, up at around 4400m in Thorung Phedi, I slipped into sheer misery.

Tossing and turning, fully clothed and stuffed into my sleeping bag, I froze my way through a dreamscape of confused and contradictory images. In glorious Technicolor I dreamed I had severe AMS and had to be taken down to the next town on the back of a donkey while the headache split my skull and I was copiously sick, despite my low food intake. I woke up in the nearest approximation to a cold sweat that you can have in sub-zero temperatures, and spent the rest of the short night dreading the crossing and dreaming of home.

We set off at 5.40am, Sheldon, Bob and I shuffling slowly through the snow onto the roof of the world. We had all popped a Diamox pill, the recommended prophylactic and treatment for AMS, and I assume it helped: we all managed to get over the top without incident (if you ignore the severe shortages of breath, a nasty headache in my case and a general malaise caused by high altitude exertion) and although the views of the top of the range and the surrounding landscapes were unique and unlike anything I've ever experienced – the silence on a snow-smothered summit is eerie, to say the least – the effort was severe. Was it worth it?

Of course it was. I learned what it is like to exist in an environment that makes every rule of existence seem like a vindictive headmaster's revenge. Breathing is constantly laboured, mealtime becomes a psychological trauma, the head aches in cycles from dawn to dusk, sleep patterns are ravaged, toiletry functions become more insistently regular than after the five-beer mark, and conversation becomes truly one-track: AMS, AMS, AMS. Then there are the ailments of snow blindness (you have to wear sunglasses constantly to avoid becoming blind, literally), windburn (lips and nose beware), sunburn (the sun is distressingly close up there), muscle strain (from carrying a bloody pack up to 5416m) and trekker's knee (from the long, long descent). But nearly everyone makes it, and the sense of achievement is totally different from exploring rainforests or trudging deserts. When I finally collapsed in Muktinath on the west side of the path, I swore I'd never do anything like that again. I probably lied.

Annapurna Circuit (Stage 2)

Written: 22 April 1998

The west side of the Circuit is a completely different experience. The track leading down from the pass, the Jomsom Trek, has high quality hotels, comparatively incredible food, a warm climate and fairly easy downhill

walking. I felt like I'd arrived in paradise: I had trekked the eastern path, I had struggled over the pass, and when I hit the other side I reverted to character. I didn't so much walk the track as travel it.

From the pilgrim town of Muktinath (where we spent two days), through Kagbeni (one day), Marpha (two days), Kalopani (one day) and Tatopani (two days) we loafed around, ate too much, drank the pleasantly priced beer and totally failed to take the walk seriously, considering the length of the challenge. My writer's block, which had set in along with the AMS in Manang, completely failed to lift and I spent hours sitting around reading, relaxing and thinking. It was a holiday. It was luxurious. It was fattening. But it was ultimately relatively boring, and I found myself, not for the first time, wishing I was in India, back where the madness is mundane, the insanity inbred and the lunacy legendary. How strange.

But Nepal's landscapes more than make up for any lack of incredulity. From the dizzy heights of the pass to the sheer valleys of the east side, the mountains never ceased to amaze me, with their wispy cloud vents, snow-blue peaks and sharp contrasts with the sky. But statistics, of which there are millions in Nepal, can be misleading in making the mountains sound out of this world. For example on Sunday 19 April I read the following in my guidebook: 'It's at around this point,

the bend in the river between Kalopani and Larjung, that you're at the bottom of the world's deepest valley. The two highest peaks in the area, Dhaulagiri (8167m/26794 ft) and Annapurna I (8091m/26545 ft) are 35km (22 miles) apart on either side of the valley. You're standing at an altitude of about 2540m/8333 ft, which is 5.5km or 3.5 miles below the summit of Dhaulagiri.' This sounds much more interesting than it really is: the reality is a wide valley with a couple of distant peaks on each side. Deep doesn't mean steep.

And then there is the dubious help offered by the various hotels around. Take this quotation from the Kalopani Guest House Menu:

FROM GUEST HOUSE DAIRY

Kalopani is a beautiful place to be spent for short trek. This place is popularly known for spectacular Sunset view over Mt. Annapurna I & Nilgiri. You can enjoy with the changing colour of the Himalay's. From here you can make 2.5 hours. Titi lake for splendid view of Mt. Dhaulagiri. For the peasant lovers you can visit the Dhungang Area. Kalopani Jungle has lost of wild life. For resting a day, you can visit the Bhudurtsho lake wich can cost 5 hours. From here you can organize Dhaulagiri Ice fall trek as

well Dhaulagiri & Annapurna Base Camp. For more detail please contact the management.

Thank you!

Grammar is evidently an optional extra when you're writing in a second language (though I can't be too critical, seeing as that's the philosophy I use with French, and it works fine for me).

At least the hotels on the west side had good standards of food, which more than made up for the less inspiring scenery. In Tal, on the east side, we had discovered bugs in the tomato ketchup bottle; when we complained to the lady owner, she examined the bugs and said, 'It's OK, these clean bugs from ceiling, not dirty bugs from floor.'

On the west side, we got our food in sizzling platters. It mirrored the east-west divide rather well, I thought, as I trundled on to the end of the track in Beni before boarding the bus to Pokhara.

Pokhara

Written: 29 April 1998

The return to civilisation from the Annapurna Circuit came as a shock. Burning through the last few days of the 21-day trek, Bob and I managed to arrive in Pokhara

on the evening of Wednesday 22nd April after experiencing the first inclement weather of the trek. Rain smattered the windscreen of the bus as we wound our way from the track end at Beni, smudging the dirt into impenetrable patterns for the driver to negotiate on his hair-raising journey through the paddies and ponds of the foothills.

I'd already reintroduced myself into the concept of the outside world when I discovered a couple of *Business Week* magazines in the lodge at Kalopani, our penultimate hotel stop. I was surprised how fascinating I found the articles on huge international conglomerates, turnovers, profit margins, executive pay packages and fluctuations in the mutual trust markets. I read it as a poor Indian might read stories of Hollywood or Disneyland, with no feeling of connection or understanding but only one of incredulity: to think that a slight change in my post-degree job hunting and I could have been hooked up into all the exciting journalism that magazines like *Business Week* peddle. Thank the Lord for my lucky escape.

But after these attitude-altering shock-tactics, reality turned out to be routine, albeit an extremely enjoyable one. Bob and I booked into a quiet little hotel in northern Pokhara, the opposite end of town to the last time I'd stayed here before leaving on the trek, and the days sunk into a litany of late breakfasts, trivial jobs

(writing postcards, washing clothes, booking bus tickets and so on) and strenuous five-minute walks into town. I dined with and said goodbye to friends from the track and exchanged addresses for future travels, but after a few days I realised that above all, I wanted to be back in India.

In a best man's speech I'd made for a dear friend called Neal, one of the most crowd-pleasing lines had been, 'Neal isn't boring; no, Neal's an actuary!' (Well, the audience had been quite, quite drunk at the time). This construct works for Nepal: Nepal isn't boring; no, Nepal's a tourist trap. Food doesn't tend to produce a churning in your colon; bus transport is almost comfortable; hotels are cheap, efficient and clean; showers are hot; people aren't intrusive; city streets are (comparatively) clean... compared to India, Nepal is tame.

Of course, Nepal's landscapes are far from tame, and indeed, after some time immersed in the culture, it becomes quite obvious that Nepal is still a thrilling place. It has a fascinating religious culture, with its Buddhist Hinduism and tolerant tendencies. It has a political system and a still-thriving monarchy that provide just as many corruption and scandal stories as any Asian government. It has temples, ashrams, cows, *sadhus*, rickshaws, mad drivers and wonderful arts and crafts... but whatever it is that makes India so addictive

is, for me anyway, missing in Nepal.

Sure, there are still plenty of mad things. Take the advertising drivel on the back of every box of Ball matches, which I quote here:

100 PER CENT SAFE SAFETY MATCHES

- * Flame only emanates leaving splint*
- * Sticks completely put out with one puff*
- * No burning tips*
- * So no dropping on clothes etc.*

Or take the countless posters of pretty houses and manicured gardens that dot the country's restaurants and offices, carrying meaningless idioms like 'The true use of Speech is not so much to express our Wants as to conceal them', or 'Financial security is the guarantee of spiritual bankruptcy' (the latter turning up on a picture of a particularly glorious house).

Then there's the large number of westerners in Nepal who have learned the local language and who have taken Nepalese culture into their hearts in much the same way as India's ashram casualties have; and in that time-honoured fashion, they enter westernised restaurants and order complicated bespoke meals simply so they can get involved in a discussion with the waiter in Nepali about whether the pizza comes with oregano and whether the vegetables are fresh. They still end up

ordering the burger and chips, but it sounds cool.

And the other travellers I met were of a particularly high calibre, with most of them taking time out in Nepal as a rest from the more burdensome experiences of India, overlanding from Europe, resting after China or whatever, and we swapped stories about particularly welcome visits to McDonald's in Java, lounging on the islands of Thailand and dealing with the hassles of Asia.

But it wasn't quite the thrill of India, and I longed to get back, so on Wednesday 29th April I bid adieu to Pokhara and took the bus to Kathmandu, my first step towards being immersed back into the madness I'd learned to love.

The Plains

Kathmandu

Written: 4 May 1998

A lone white man ambles through the square, looking lost in the way that only tourists can manage. Durbar Square is bustling, but in his mission to take in the atmosphere he's committed the ultimate sin and the touts aren't going to miss a minute. 'Rickshaw, mate, cheap price'; 'Picture? One picture?'; 'Something to *smoke...?*'; 'Money change, you make money change?'; 'I am very good guide, sir, many things to see in Durbar Square'; 'Just looking, sir, just looking, very good stones'. In Kathmandu, you learn to look occupied *all* the time if you want to avoid hassle, and he'll learn quickly.

Kathmandu's Durbar Square is a strange collision of worship and wheeler dealing. The pagodas of the scores of temples in the city's cultural centre provide steps for people to loiter on, trading gossip and hatching deals and schemes. For the rickshaw-*wallahs* it's a place to catch trade, and for the street sellers it's a Covent Garden without licences or regulations; and as if the mayhem caused by milling crowds and street vendors isn't enough, it's also a busy thoroughfare for taxis,

bicycles, motorcycles and porters with their huge baskets of goods, bound for some other dusty corner of the city. If Kathmandu has a heart it's here, the source of pulsating arteries that speed off³ in all four directions of the compass.

Durbar Square, from which my hotel was just round the corner, feels a million cultural miles away from Thamel, even though it's only a 15-minute walk. Thamel is to Kathmandu what Khao San is to Bangkok, what Kuta is to Bali, and what Goa is to Nepal: it's the country's centre for travellers.

And with this territory come restaurants, travel agencies, craft shops, email centres, touts, marijuana pedlars, good pizza and, rather disappointingly, an almost complete lack of character. I had anticipated a soul-free environment, but Thamel had all the charm of a McDonald's; I popped in, did what I had to do, and buggered off as quickly as I could.

Luckily the rest of the city had plenty of charm, even through the misty haze of my apathy.

Swayambhunath Temple, colloquially known as the Monkey Temple due to its local residents, was a pleasant but not terribly surprising Nepalese temple –

³ OK, this is poetic licence, I admit. You're just as likely to find a speeding car in Kathmandu as you are on the M25 at 5.30 on a Friday afternoon, but what the Nepalese lack in velocity they make up for with voracity, and what their rusty old cars lack in aesthetics they make up for with acoustics. As long as the accelerator's connected and the horn works, the car is fine.

Buddhist *stupas*, Hindu *shikharas*, pigeons galore – but its unearthly combination of Hinduism and hawking made it worth a visit. Besides, western tourists are such funny creature sometimes, with their inappropriate clothes, in-your-face photography and a total lack of bargaining ability, that I found watching the watchers much more interesting than yet another collection of gunk-smearred statues of the Hindu-Buddhist pantheon.

Especially interesting, though, was one particular western woman, who must have been in her mid-thirties; complete with *tika* marks on her forehead from a recent *puja*, she was leaning on the grate containing a statue of Locana, the consort of Aksobhya, one of the Dhyani buddhas who sits in the pose of subduing Mara, or resisting the temptation of the devil. Through her mumblings, I saw a look on her face that I recognised: it was the look on a child's face when snuggling up to its mother, a blissful awareness of warmth and security.

I get that look when a particularly good Led Zeppelin riff hits the speakers, but she was getting it from a religion; this was wonderful for her, and watching her distant smile and lightly closed eyes I wondered if I was missing out on something magical... but then the grungy guitar line from *Whole Lotta Love* started grinding through my subconscious, and I realised that I've got it all right here, in my head. Music is my portable religion, and CDs are my icons, blasphemous

though that may sound.

What a shame, though, that Kathmandu was perpetually shrouded in the pre-monsoon mist, clouding out the mountains and making the potentially spectacular views from the temples more reminiscent of Calcutta from the Howrah Bridge. People complain bitterly about Kathmandu's pollution, and although I found it a paragon of cleanliness after India, it's still got a long way to go as far as air pollution goes; the face mask is as common here as it is in Bangkok.

One day I walked south of Kathmandu to Patan, previously a separate city state but now effectively a suburb of the capital; the third city in the Kathmandu Valley, Bhaktapur, is a little further to the east, and was again a separate state with a separate king before the three cities were finally united in 1382 by the rulers of Kathmandu (which is why Kathmandu is the capital and not Patan or Bhaktapur). Patan has as its main attraction a huge number of temples, and it was here that I realised that I no longer gave a hoot about temples. Imagine doing a tour of Europe where the main attraction was churches: after a couple of months you'd probably break into a cold sweat at the sight of yet another spire. For me, anything to do with Buddha, Siva, Krishna, Vishnu and the rest of the gang was, by now, just another building.

The walk back from Patan had its surprises, though.

For example, the fields of marijuana plants lining the River Bagmati are a sight to behold; one minute you're wandering along the path minding your own business, and the next minute you're surrounded by luscious greenery, reaching well above head height and generating a distinctive smell on the breeze. I had to stop to take a picture, it was such an Asian sight, and managed to attract the attention of one of Kathmandu's more sociable wasters. After the inevitable small talk he gestured to the buds swaying in the breeze and asked, 'Do you know what this is?'

'It's marijuana,' I replied. 'And I thought *Calcutta* was the City of Joy.'

'It's grass,' he said, sniffing at my terminology with a smile in his eye. 'Grass,' he repeated, and turned to go: he didn't even look back or say goodbye. Perhaps announcing that this was grass was his party piece and he'd done his bit, or perhaps he'd enjoyed the local crop just a little too much to hold a conversation longer than two minutes. I didn't mind a bit: some conversations are dead in the water even before they're launched.

So I returned to Kathmandu, studiously walking straight past the millions of holy sites and instead marvelling at the insanity of the locals. For example, I went to an electrical shop to buy a bulb for my torch which had blown right in the middle of the previous night's power cut; the man didn't have the right type,

and answered my ensuing question by saying that there were no other shops around who sold bulbs, and none that sold torches. He obviously didn't get out much: four doors down was a man with bulbs *and* torches who sold me what I wanted without hesitation.

The next weirdo I encountered shouted over to me, 'Where you from? Australia?' Now this was getting strange: I'd been called an Australian three times already and I hadn't even opened my mouth or put on my bush hat, so I walked over and asked him why he thought I was an Aussie. 'You've got a beard,' he replied, as if that was all the explanation anyone needed. It scuppered me completely, enough to motivate me to book a ticket for my next destination, Janakpur.

Floundering in Kathmandu

Written: 3 May 1998

In Kathmandu I floundered, suffering from a lack of motivation that I hadn't known since Bangkok, and yet again the reason was the same: I was getting bored and wanted to get into India. My days centred round battling with the Nepalese email system, wandering aimlessly through various shady suburbs of the city, and killing time in numerous cafés with numerous novels. But I wasn't miserable: I was far too apathetic for that.

It's always interesting, this drifter's equivalent of

the dole; because the whole nature of travelling requires self-motivation, it falls down around your head when you lose interest. I found myself wandering through the city, not even turning my head to look at the strange sights, because to me the strange sights no longer felt strange. The dead goat rotting in the gutter was mere street clutter; the half-crazed saffron-clad madman, clutching his trident and dancing in public was, well, just another *sadhu*; the near misses of rickshaws were familiar pedestrian obstacles; the rampant colour of a Ganesh temple was simply another aspect of another building; the stench of rotting rubbish was just part of the atmosphere; the hassle of the touts was but a fact of life: nothing surprises when apathy strikes. I do, however, have three main remedies for the apathy blues, discovered after long periods of aimlessness in Asia.

Apathy Remedy Number One is to crash out in a pleasant spot with a good book, good food and good company: this is a favourite solution in India, where it's not so much used as a treatment for apathy, more as a treatment for exhaustion. However in Kathmandu it didn't apply, because I'd spent my entire Pokharan sojourn crashing out, reading and eating, and I'd got pretty bored pretty quickly.

Apathy Remedy Number Two is to climb a nearby mountain, a remedy that proved especially successful in Australia; but having spent three weeks climbing bloody

mountains, the last thing I needed was more uphill struggling.

Apathy Remedy Number Three is simply to get back on the road, where the challenges and surprises of travelling soon make apathy unwelcome and impractical. But I didn't want to leave Kathmandu until I'd either sent my email or come up against a definite brick wall, so for the time being I was stuck where I was.

No more remedies came to mind, so I wallowed in my indifference, biding my time for the return to India. There are far worse places to be bored, after all.

Death in the Afternoon

Written: 6 May 1998

Seeing a dead body is one of the most unnerving sights on offer: whenever I think of Hobart in Tasmania, I think of two pale, bloated bodies washing up from a sunken car in the dock, trailing frothy white vomit on the black water. Worse than this is to watch someone die, to go from alive to dead in the blink of an eye, a pleasure I have yet to witness. But surely the worst sight of all must be to see someone still alive, but dying slowly and desperately in front of your very eyes, without a hope for survival; this is why fatal cancer and AIDS are so frightening, because there's no hope. At

least a bullet in the head is quick.

Halfway between Janakpur and the Nepal-India border the bus blared its horn and swerved to the right, not unusual behaviour in this part of the world given the number of potholes and slow trucks that need to be overtaken. From my window seat on the left-hand side of the rusting vehicle I was idly staring at the passing scenery, the distant cloud-shrouded Himalayas providing a backdrop to farmers' fields, bullocks pulling ploughs and women carrying bundles of sticks on their heads. But as the bus swerved onto the right-hand side of the road I saw what had caused the driver to punch his horn. In the middle of the eastbound carriageway, a woman was dying.

I must have had a total of two seconds to take in the scene, and initially I didn't register quite what I was seeing: it was only an instant later, after we had left the whole scene behind, that it hit me what I had witnessed, and it smacked me in the guts like a rabbit punch. On the side of the road was a crowd of about twenty people, standing stock still in frozen amazement at the sight in front of them, nobody moving a muscle. Buses screamed by in both directions, the thought of stopping to help not even a faint flicker in the minds of the driver and conductors, and fifty yards further up the highway children pedalled their rusty bicycles on errands for their parents, just another hot day on the plains of the Terai.

But back there on the searing tarmac lay a woman in a spreading pool of blood the colour of rusty sump oil, a victim of a hit and run. I have seen countless wrecks on the side of the road, both in the West and in the Third World, and hulking and mangled metal is disturbing, but an accepted and acceptable fact of life: what I have never seen is the human cost. The photographs in Kuala Lumpur shocked me into realising the severity of road death, the butcher-like quality of the lacerated leg or the tyre-crushed cranium, but the sight of death in reality made those photographs seem pathetic.

She was still moving when we passed her. Lying in a position similar to that of the unfit man doing press-ups – legs and belly still on the ground, shoulders raised by her palms pushing on the tarmac – her arms were clawing at the bitumen in an attempt to pull herself up. But what she couldn't see was the mutilated mass of raw meat that had once been her legs and pelvis, a sight that reminded me instantly of the death throes of water buffalo in Sulawesi, and throughout her struggles to cling onto life the crowd stared, unmoving. Two minutes up the road a flock of vultures preened itself, oblivious as yet to the potential meal slowly growing colder and less aware just down the road, and within half a second of us flashing past, the scenery was back to normal. 'An accident?' asked my neighbour, a

friendly Christian from Janakpur. ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘an accident’, thinking how inept the terminology was. An accident is when you spill milk on the kitchen floor or don’t make it to the toilet in time; it hardly applies to a lonely and painful death while the village looks on, friends frozen in fear.

I found myself trying to imagine what was going through the woman’s head. The pain would be so severe as to make a death from shock as likely as a death from loss of blood; with Nepal’s hospital facilities being almost non-existent, let alone a national health plan, there is no doubt that by the time I reached India the woman would be dead. Her frantic clawing was futile in the extreme, but what else could she do? I imagined her calling to her friends for help while they looked on in a mixture of horror and fascination; for people who have not been educated with biology lessons and horror movies, it would be amazing to actually see inside a human body, to see bones, flesh and blood. Besides, it would be the will of the gods that she was struck down, and who is the man in the street to interfere with the will of the gods?

And I felt a rush of guilt, an unfair feeling seeing as even if the bus had stopped, I could have done nothing to help. I saw a woman dying on the road from a severely crushed torso and massive haemorrhaging, and I was absolutely helpless. The same applied to her

onlookers, who would have had no idea about first aid; indeed, a skilled doctor could probably have done nothing except administer painkillers and talk to the family. But I will remember that desperate scrabbling for a long time, and I have no doubt that the first memory of the eastern Terai that springs to mind will not be of happy festivals in Janakpur, but of a dying carcass on the road.

Someone once told me that the reason buses and trucks constantly use their horns in India and Nepal is that women who carry things on their heads cannot turn to see if there is anything coming, so the traffic blasts away to stop them walking across the road. Perhaps she didn't hear the horn, or perhaps the driver didn't bother to sound his blower; whatever, the result was another insignificant death of another peasant worker, or that's how it would have appeared to the world at large.

It was far from insignificant to the western tourist who flashed past on his way to the border.

Janakpur

Written: 6 May 1998

My immersion back into India came earlier than expected: Janakpur is an Indian town in all but geography. Sitting a few kilometres from the Indian border (where only Indians and Nepalese can cross) the

town is a pilgrimage site for Hindus, a bustling market town and Indian in everything from the smell to the scenery.

It was glorious walking through the mayhem again. I explored on foot, as is my wont (people rarely sidle up to you and start crazy conversations when you're hurtling along on two wheels) and soon found myself wandering through fields, past pools and around temples, all brimming with people washing, hawking, doing laundry, carrying large bundles on their heads, and generally getting on with life. And in the middle of it all is a mighty strange sight: the Janaki Mandir.

Imagine a big palace with turrets, towers and gates that's been dipped in white marshmallow and painted with joyous abandon in a clash of colours that Jackson Pollock would have thought garish. Although a modern building (built in 1912) this celebration of vitality denotes the spot where Sita, Rama's wife, was born, back in the days of the *Ramayana* (another name for Sita is Janaki, after her father Janaka, hence the name Janakpur); round the corner is the Rama Sita Bibaha Mandir, a tacky little building that marks the spot where Rama and Sita were married, and which contains a Disney-esque collection of figures acting out the marriage ceremony. And surrounding this construction of confectionery are stalls selling everything from sarees to sweets, adding yet more colour to the scene: if I

needed reminding of the rainbow quality of India, this was it.

The area outside town was delightful, too. To the northwest of the centre are three tanks, big man-made lakes with steps leading down to them (known as *ghats*) where people wash themselves, their clothes, their rickshaws, their cows and just about anything else that needs cleaning. It seems that these tanks are also the social equivalent of the shopping mall, for no sooner had I plonked myself down on the banks for a rest than half the population dropped by for a chat, no mean task given my lack of Nepali and their lack of English. However one well-spoken potential medic turned up to break down the barriers, and Nazir and I talked for quite some time, him telling me about the temples in the area, and me telling him that no, western women are not easy and sex isn't a free-for-all in England. As with most towns that haven't been tainted by tourism, the people of Janakpur were genuine, courteous and friendly, and if they weren't they would have made all their snide comments in the local language Maithili, which would have gone straight over my head anyway.

I also managed to time my visit to coincide with the celebrations of Sita's birthday, which of course is an excuse for a big ol' party in the city which houses Sita's birthplace: seven days of party, to be precise. Tuesday 5th May was the last day of the celebrations, which

explains why I kept being accosted by mumbling *sadhus* who would put a couple of petals into my hand, smear a mark on my forehead in red *tika* powder, mutter a few meaningless words in whatever language they were speaking that day, and then hold out their hands for a few rupees. It was quite entertaining, and the reaction from the locals as I walked the streets was not unlike that in Bijapur when I got stained purple by the Holi mob; they don't get too many white people in Janakpur, especially ones with *tika* marks.

The celebrations that night were worth the effort, too. I watched a melee of sights and sounds go past; there were crazies smothered from head to toe in *tika* powder, *sadhus* chanting mantras, bands dressed in clothes that bore a striking resemblance to Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, floats carrying petal-smothered images of Rama and Sita, loudspeakers proclaiming goodness knows what, horns blaring, bicycle bells ringing and, above all, a real sense of carnival. Everyone smiled, everyone celebrated and everyone seemed genuinely pleased to have a foreigner witnessing the scenes. What happy Hindus they were, and what a contrast to the reserved peoples of the mountains. I guess that's what living a few kilometres from India does to you...

THE END

Further Reading

This story is continued in another of my books, *Many Ways to Change Your Mind: Travels in India* (also available for free from **www.moxon.net**). If you enjoyed this book, you might like to know that there's a whole series of free books like this available from **www.moxon.net**, covering 16 countries and five continents:

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- *Snaking Patterns of Sand: Travels in Morocco*
- *Snow on the Sun Loungers: Travels in Cyprus*
- *The Head and the Heart: Travels in Senegal*

- *A Million Mosquitoes Can't Be Wrong: Travels in the Gambia*
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Happy travels!

Mark Moxon, September 2004

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