

With no luggage to lug about and the plane delayed three hours because of fog, check in for my Kathmandu flight was a relaxed, if somewhat uncertain affair, the desk remaining unmanned until well after the flight appeared on the departures board. In my experience to date I'd seen little to distinguish most international airlines or airports, so after 24 hours of continuous travel Royal Nepal Airlines (RNAC) felt pleasingly distinctive, with sari-clad hostesses serving an authentic, spicy curry. As we approached Kathmandu I saw little of the mountains due to the fog's vestigial low cloud, and we touched down in pale, late-afternoon sunshine. Kathmandu's Tribhuvan terminal was perhaps the nicest I'd seen anywhere: calm (possibly on account of most locals being barred!) and attractive, built from dark bricks and dark wood, much of it carved in the traditional Newari manner. I paid US\$20 for a visa, changed some money⁴⁰ and boarded a \$2 taxi for Thamel, the budget tourist district.

Every book on Nepal quotes Kipling:

And the wildest dreams of Kew are the facts of Kathmandu...

— "In the Neolithic Age", *Rudyard Kipling*, 1895

I don't know whether he was discussing botany or prehistory or something else entirely, but my first impressions, as the dilapidated Toyota struggled up the west bank of the Dhobi Khola, were not of somewhere wild. They were of another Third World city: dirty, noisy, frenetic and poor. We passed tumbled-down houses and grubby, barefoot children, we were harried by impatient motorcyclists and choked by the fumes from snarling auto-rickshaws. We continued east, passing beneath the high railings of the (otherwise invisible) Royal Palace. Only a short distance beyond, a congested chowk marked the boundary of Thamel — the Kathmandu of every traveller's delight. My taxi came to an immediate halt; the narrow street was completely blocked. Touts peddled tiger balm, carpets, flutes and ethnic jewellery. A continuous line of little clothes shops crammed their narrow doorways and spilled out onto the street countless variations on a traveller-hippie theme, while a few more up-market places sported glass fronts and window displays of pretty trinkets. Locals and more-colourfully dressed visitors edged around the car; I abandoned the last few hundred metres of the ride and pushed into the throng.

My first priority, as ever, was a bed, and to this I applied myself single-mindedly, resisting the lure of bright, convivial cake shops, dim, alluring restaurants, book shops, trekking gear stores and travel agents promoting package trips to Chitwan and Tibet (!) With nothing in my preferred price range, I went down-market rather than up; five months on the road had taught me caution. The *New Pheasant Lodge* was convenient, being located in central Thamel, and cheap, at just Rs50 (63p). By the time I'd checked-in the afternoon sunshine had faded to grey and the winter mists were descending on the city. The room was clean but spartan: just a wooden bed frame and thin mattress, and a chair to augment the four walls. A solitary naked light bulb cast a dim presence over the bare interior. The austere surroundings reminded me of my destitution. I felt a slight sadness, a loss of something intangible; perhaps this was how ascetics felt upon giving up their worldly goods?

I'd left New Zealand in the middle of the southern hemisphere summer, wearing just a shirt and light cotton trousers. Now I was 1500m up in the northern winter and feeling it; and the clothes I wore, of course, were all I now possessed. I didn't have to look far in Thamel, though, to find myself some extra insulation: a thick, coarse woollen sweater and a woollen hat. The staff were a little nonplussed by my request for a receipt. I tried explaining the concept of travel insurance, but in the end they just gave me a blank and I filled it in myself: Rs350 (£4.43) for the sweater and Rs70 for the hat.

That evening I ate in the cosy surroundings of *KC's Restaurant*, in the company of an Australian girl who'd also arrived that day. I enjoyed a brown rice stir-fry and a locally

⁴⁰ At £1 = Rs79 (Nepali Rupee) or US\$1 = Rs42, the same everywhere.

brewed beer, for Rs68 and Rs50 respectively. I'd have enjoyed a few more beers in the attached bar, but by 8 o'clock my eyelids were assuming autonomous control and I made my excuses — I'd been awake for the last 30 hours. As I walked home through now surprisingly quiet, dark streets, it occurred to me that KC's would not have been out of place back home in Malvern; was this really the Third World? Thamel was a little confusing.

Back at the lodge the thin duvet on the bed looked hopelessly inadequate. The room next door was unlocked and unoccupied, so I appropriated another. I slept in all my clothes, woollens included, but still endured a freezing, sleepless night, exasperated by the thin mattress and its unyielding wooden support. Just before dawn I resolved to move up-market, come first light.

Day 148: Monday 30 Dec 91 Kathmandu

Kathmandu's winter weather, I discovered, was surprisingly predictable. I awoke each morning to thick fog and a damp, penetrating cold. In the normally vigorous, bustling streets of Thamel sweater-clad Nepalese would just hurry on by, topis (colourful Nepalese caps) pulled down and scarves wrapped tightly across their mouths. Only the most ardent touts plied their trade, while their quarry either stayed in bed or made a quick dash for breakfast at one of the warm, inviting cafés. By 10.30 the fog had usually cleared, and the rest of the day would be warm and sunny; hot, even, at mid-day. As darkness encroached, at around 6 o'clock, the temperature would fall quickly; nights were always cold.

I'd predictably little inclination to lie in this morning and was one of the first customers at the *Mona Lisa* café. A bowl of thick porridge warmed and revived me, and a browse of the *Rising Nepal* over coffee initiated me into the local issues, and perhaps more interestingly, the Nepalese viewpoint on international events. The coffee here was instant; I saw no evidence of the coffee bean, whole or ground, anywhere in Nepal.

Once recovered from the night's ordeal I carried out my resolution and checked in at the *Kathmandu Guesthouse*. Set back from the noisy street and enclosing a peaceful garden, it was the address in Thamel. A single room with a sink in the (cheaper) old wing cost \$5, four times the New Pheasant rate, but worth every cent. My room, however, wouldn't be ready until 11 o'clock, so in the meantime I took myself off to see the British Airways agent about my errant rucksack.

Aroon Thapa was a short, round-faced chap, in his forties I'd guess, well fed and neatly dressed in a dark blue blazer and tie. He also wore a permanent slight frown, giving him the air of someone constantly under pressure of work, although I doubted if this was the case. Over the coming days I was to become one of his most frequent visitors, and as we became more familiar he occasionally let the frown slip; he even smiled, once. This morning, though, he'd one particularly anxious, almost accusative and definitely tiresome traveller to deal with, and it remained firmly in place. He was clearly less confident than Delhi about the likelihood of my rucksack finding its own way back to me. The question of airline compensation, from him at least, was out of the question. BA didn't actually fly into Kathmandu and hence his office was just a sales agency; matters of compensation had to be taken up with BA in the UK and with my travel insurance company. To this end I should have obtained PIR (Property Irregularity Report) before leaving Delhi. Nevertheless, he would supply me with a signed statement verifying my story, and copies of communications between his office and BA. These would commence this morning with a telex to BA Delhi, to which he expected a prompt reply and therefore suggested I called after lunch.

Back in Thamel my room was ready. It was clean and tidy, fully furnished and overlooking the garden; even the floor was polished. It didn't take me long to move my things from the New Pheasant, before going in search of a coffee. The guidebook described *Helena's* cake

display window as Thamel's most popular tourist sight, and they may well have been right. One of the upwardly mobile descendants of the original Freak Street pie shops, they'd practised their art on generations of travellers and were now masters of their craft; utterly delicious was my verdict. Afterwards I made a brief foray to the south of Thamel, to buy some underwear⁴¹. I didn't have to venture far before I was leaving the tourist district. Buildings were older and darker; statues and idols were dotted here and there and the shops and cafés catered for locals, not tourists. My initial disappointment with the "wildest dreams of Kew" began to evaporate; further exploration held promise, Kathmandu beckoned.

So, however, did lunch, and therefore Thamel. My pumpkin pie was wholesome enough, but uninspiring; with competition and variety as was to be found in Thamel this constituted a terminal pronouncement on KC's. Signs of life at BA Delhi were not forthcoming, either. Mr Thapa was surprised, and suggested I tried again tomorrow morning. From his office on the main boulevard of Durbar Marg it was a 20 minute walk south-west to Durbar Square, the centre of the old city. Most capital cities have their share of ancient and historic monuments scattered amongst their streets. Kathmandu, I learnt, had a liberal quantity spread about just one square. Durbar Square was not obviously a square at all, however, as the old Royal Palace sprawled over a third of its area. Plenty of tourists were milling about, of course, but most of the commotion came from the indigenous population: buying, selling and driving beneath pagodas, palaces, temples, shrines and assorted monuments to gods and kings — a fascinating collection of the mystic and mythic. I wandered around gazing at the eclectic assortment of periods and styles, quite awe-struck. It didn't have the overpowering uniformity of central Sana'a, but a rich diversity which alternately impressed, intrigued and surprised. I didn't linger, for it was getting late, and since I didn't have my camera with me I contented myself with a quick reconnaissance before turning back towards Thamel.

As I passed the entrance to the New Pheasant courtyard I caught the sound of familiar music coming from somewhere opposite. It was quite heartening to hear, so I trace it to a narrow passageway which I followed to an upstairs bar. The tape was the new *Jethro Tull* album *Catfish Rising*, one that I'd bought a few weeks earlier in Auckland; someone had been quick off the mark with their bootlegging. The bar was almost deserted, but as I'd little else to do I sat down and ordered a beer, brought to my table with a large plate of complimentary popcorn. The only other customer in the place was an Australian called Eric. He was big bloke, tall and broad with a ginger beard and an authentic accent. He'd recently returned from a trekking expedition, organised by a most able Nepalese guide named Dinesh (although led by his brother Ganesh). He was meeting Dinesh (and another Australian) shortly, outside the Kathmandu Guesthouse, and invited me along. We finished the beers and went downstairs; after quick introductions the conversation was brief, as it was already dark and getting cold. I met Eric again later that evening for dinner. We ate at the *Third Eye*, where I chose vegetable cutlet and found it disappointingly similar to pumpkin pie. Tomorrow was New Year's Eve; Eric, Dinesh and some others were celebrating in the *Rum Doodle Bar*, and I arranged to meet them there at 7.30.

Day 149: **Tuesday 31 Dec 91** Kathmandu

I awoke early again this morning; my Guest House room was little warmer than the New Pheasant and hot water was confined to the shower. I took breakfast at Mona Lisa's. In contrast to yesterday morning I felt quite upbeat, encouraged by my meeting with Eric and Dinesh and enticed by what I'd seen of Durbar Square. I ate my porridge with some haste and was soon striding off down Shukrapath, camera in hand.

Thahiti Square marked the boundary of the tourist zone, where I'd bought my underwear from a street trader's barrow yesterday. The centre of the square was occupied by a large,

⁴¹ Socks and underpants cost Rs50 a pair; sizes are smaller than in the UK!

squat, smooth white dome — a Buddhist stupa. What its religious significance was I couldn't tell, but it served a useful secular purpose as a traffic island. A few hundred metres south of Thahiti I happened to glance down one of the many small alleyways that lead off every Kathmandu thoroughfare. From a gap between the huddled buildings another stupa loomed, much taller than Thahiti, with prayer flags streaming from its spire and unblinking eyes staring down with intent. The cloak of mist and the dim, winter-morning light conspired with this unmarked entrance to lend a definite air of secrecy. I edged passed some ferocious-looking dogs, steadfastly ignoring their growls, and emerged into a small square. The stupa resembled a scale copy of Swayambhu, that dazzling white-and-gold icon of Nepal that graces the cover of so many guidebooks, although this one was rather less well maintained. The square was only just big enough to contain it, and what little space remained was filled with an assortment statues and idols. There were no tourists here, nor any worshipers, just a handful of Nepalese teenagers milling about, and a large flock of pigeons enjoying the peace.

By the time I reached Durbar Square the mist had all but cleared. I retraced yesterday's meander, this time at a more leisurely pace and with camera in hand. I peered through the Hanuman Dhoka (gate) into the old Royal Palace, but all I could see was a couple of soldiers enjoying a cigarette; I didn't venture further. Around the square I noticed political slogans painted on walls and temples; no-one seemed to have worried about defacing historic monuments. On the steps of a temple, beneath a slogan urging support for the Communist Party, some youngsters had set up a stall. Eager participants in the free market, they were too busy making money selling trinkets to tourists to worry about political ideology and appreciate the irony.

Democracy (of sorts) had only recently come to Nepal. The logistics of staging the election must have been formidable, with such a widely scattered and often remote population and far from universal literacy. Perhaps to counter the latter, each political party had adopted a symbol: a sickle for the communists, a tree for the democrats and the sun for the monarchists.

The Kumari Chowk is the residence of the Raj Kumari, Kathmandu's prepubescent living goddess. The doorway was richly carved: concentric lines of geometric patterns and human skulls surrounded the entrance, while above it paraded an elaborate frieze of multi-armed deities. The Kumari was reputed to make occasional appearances at a first-floor window overlooking the courtyard inside. A couple of Americans and I went through, but there was no-one about. Perhaps we'd have been luckier in the tourist season.

Although now eclipsed by Thamel, the name of Freak Street has been common currency amongst travellers for generations. Its reputation has long since faded, though, and most of today's backpackers come to Kathmandu in search of more wholesome pursuits than cheap tripping. Nevertheless it remains for the time being, as part of travellers' heritage, the place where it all began. I wanted to see the street, out of curiosity if nothing else, and before it completely faded away. Jhochen, for that's its Nepali name, runs south from New Road, starting a short distance east of Durbar Square. It was an unprepossessing sight, like a faded, quieter, less intense version of Thamel. The lodges looked very run down; the few clothes shops mimicked Thamel designs, and the cafés were dark and cheerless. I had a cup of tea in one, a subterranean place, entered by a short flight of stairs. It was clean enough, and cheap (tea was Rs4, about half the Thamel rate), but I was the only customer. I could have imagined it being quite atmospheric after dark, with a good crowd inside, but right now it felt a little sad. After tea I nosed around a while longer, but found nothing worth photographing. Neither did I spot any living relics from the hippie era; just a German couple, in their mid-twenties, dressed up and pretending.

From Freak Street I made my way down narrow lanes through poorer neighbourhoods, through the vegetable market (quiet, now) and out of the old city. I called at the post office before turning north up Kantipath, by the side of the Tudikhel parade ground and on, eventually, to my favourite attraction: the British Airways office. To my utter disappointment

there was still no news. Mr Thapa agreed to send another telex, but besides that, he declared, there was nothing further he could do; I'd have to wait. I returned to Thamel, tired and depressed; uncertainty over my rucksack weighed heavily on my mind, spoiling my enjoyment of the city and preventing me from making plans. I did at least enjoy an excellent lunch, of tuna roll and apple strudel, in the restful garden of the *Pumpernickel Bakery* — a welcome retreat amidst the hustle of Thamel.

After lunch I walked out to the Swayambhu temple complex, perched on a wooded hill on the outskirts of the city, a few kilometres west of Thamel. Milling about at the foot of the hill were crowds Tibetan people; this was the first time I'd encountered them. Their appearance was very different to Nepalese, with darker skin, flatter faces and Oriental slanted eyes. They wore traditional dress and their hair long, tied back with red scarves. "Altogether, a bit wilder-looking" [than Nepalese] was how I described them in my journal, along with the observation that "Some of the girls are very attractive." Many of the Tibetans carried small copper cylinders on sticks — prayer wheels, which they spun as they walked, thereby releasing the inscribed invocation. Others pushed the huge, fixed wheels installed in buildings by the roadside. Following the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950 and the failed uprising of '59 this area had become home to hundreds of refugees. Chinese occupation and oppression still continues, and so does the flow of asylum seekers. Nepalese border police illegally hand over 15 to 20 escapees a month to the Chinese.⁴² The temple complex was reached by a long, steep stone staircase, lined with Buddha statues and mani stones — slates inscribed in Tibetan script with the Buddhist mantra "Om mani padme hum" ("Oh hail the jewel in the lotus"). Tibetans on the path sold pebble-sized versions, and ethnic jewellery and so on to passing, wheezing tourists, many of who, I suspected, were simply glad of the rest and happy to spend a few rupees for the excuse.

The Swayambhu stupa was an impressive sight. The gold gleamed in the afternoon sunlight, the prayer flags fluttered and the all-seeing eyes of Buddha gazed out over the Kathmandu Valley. The all-encompassing panorama of city and fields was reason to climb the stairs in itself, and indeed, that seemed the only reason why many tourists had made the effort; a mid-afternoon visit here was not in any way a spiritual experience. I strolled around the endless collection of shrines, statues and the like, and photographed the rampant monkeys. Swayambhu and its 2000-year-old stupa are of immense importance to Tantric Buddhism and the valley's creation myths, but sadly the symbolism was lost on me. I came across one particularly intriguing character standing beside a huge bell. With his permission I took his photograph, but afterwards, to my indignation he held out his hand for some money. I refused, with some disdain.

It is against my principles to pay people for photographs; I liken it to paying for conversation. Therefore I always ask first, and forgo the opportunity if a request for money is made. I'd assumed in my ignorance this guy to be a Buddhist monk on the make. It was sometime afterwards before I realised that he perhaps wasn't, but was instead a sadhu, a wandering Hindu ascetic. These people live virtually without possessions and rely on alms to survive. If he was one, and I'd realised at the time, then I'd have viewed his request in a different light. Never mind, we live and learn.

At the entrance to the Shree Karma Raj Mahavihar monastery I removed my shoes and took a few steps inside. It was obviously in frequent use; a monk in maroon overalls cleaned the brassware, while hundreds of butter lamps flickered and danced in the background. It was an everyday scene of monastery life, and not the exotic mysticism I'd naively expected. I don't really know what I was looking for — nothing particularly profound — but I didn't find it in there. I stuffed a few rupees in the collection box and went to sit down outside. On the wall in a quiet corner of the compound sat a middle-aged monk. He had his back to the view and was chanting in a low, other-worldly voice. I was fascinated and wanted to listen,

⁴² Source: *Tibet News Bulletin* No.4, Autumn 1994, pub. Tibet Support Group UK.

but felt self-conscious and worried my presence might distract or offend him. I sat down at a respectful distance and looked out over the stupa. The chanting wafted over me, carried on the breeze; my mind caught hold and followed it, quite effortlessly, and for a few minutes I was captivated. Then another tourist came along. He was obviously intrigued and clearly wanted to use the video camera he clutched, but he appeared reluctant to intrude. Instead of sitting down, he hovered about awkwardly, fiddling with the camera and staring at the monk, who completely ignored him. I, unfortunately, could not, and found his presence unsettling. After a little while I had to get up and leave; he'd broken the spell.

I didn't think I'd led an unusually sheltered life, but I had, up until this day, managed to go 28 years without setting eyes on a human corpse. On the way back from Swayambhu this afternoon my unbroken run finally ended. The first hint of what was in store was the smell. Human flesh is supposed to resemble most closely that of pigs, but the putrid stench which enveloped me as I unsuspectingly approached the cremation pavilion bore not the slightest resemblance to roast pork. On the bank of the Bishnumati River a small concrete plinth supported a pagoda-style bonfire. Orange flames licked around the logs, and from between the straw kindling poked assorted limbs, charred and not easily recognisable. Amid clouds of stinking smoke, rendered pale yellow by the late-afternoon sunlight, two men stoked the fire; there appeared to be no mourners. I found myself a place upwind, out of the smoke and off the path, and watched. Everyone, I'm sure, has experienced the strange attraction of the macabre, but when faced with it so directly and unexpectedly I found it difficult to know what to do. I knew what I *wanted* to do – whip out the camera and get in close – but what Nepalese etiquette demanded I'd not the faintest idea. Were these guys crematorium workers just doing their job, and maybe therefore tolerant of some weirdo tourist wanting to photograph them? Or were they the deceased's relatives, likely to be deeply offended by any such insensitive, impertinent intrusion? I stayed where I was and kept the camera away from eye; I focused by guessing the distance, and selected automatic exposure before shooting from the waist. Although aware of my presence the men ignored me, and after a couple of ill-composed pictures I turned and went on my way.

Back in Thamel, I bumped into Eric. He'd been shopping for presents and was keen to show me the khukris (traditional Nepalese knives, as used by Gurkha soldiers) he'd bought; I went back to his hotel to admire them. They were huge, made from glass, hollow and filled with Nepal Distillery rum (brand name *Khukri*) and quite awful. At first I assumed he'd bought them as a joke, but apparently not; there's no accounting for taste, I suppose, or the lack of it. The rum is rather good, one of the distillery's better efforts (much better than their whisky), but really, I think it comes best in bottles.

Since I was meeting the others in the Rum Doodle Bar later this evening I decided to give its downstairs restaurant a go beforehand. Like most Thamel dining experiences the room was dimly lit and quite intimate, an ambience heightened by regular power cuts⁴³ ("load shedding"), when the lighting reverted entirely to candles and storm lamps. Quite atmospheric perhaps, but not, unfortunately, conducive to meeting people and making new friends; I dined alone. Since the vast majority of Nepalese are Hindus, the flesh of the sacred cow, not surprisingly, never appeared on any menu. This may have, I speculated, encouraged the culinary diversity of Thamel by effectively barring the international burger chains, who would undoubtedly have thrived here. Was Kathmandu the only capital city in the world without a McDonald's? The substitute for beef is *buf* – water buffalo. So far I'd avoided meat as a health precaution, but by now, I reckoned, my digestive system must have been getting used to the Nepalese flora; I ordered my steak peppered. Since buf doesn't taste that different to beef this rendered my fillet almost indistinguishable; it was tasty, though.

Bars, outside of the top-end hotels, were thin on the ground in Kathmandu. The Rum Doodle's *40,000½-Foot Bar* was probably the best in town (sorry Sam). The room was a

⁴³ Despite Nepal supposedly having the world's highest potential for hydroelectric power generation.

narrow rectangle; the bar itself occupied half of one of the long walls, while at the other end an open fire on a raised hearth blazed away cheerfully. This, apparently, had been the first bar in Thamel, which probably accounted for its après trek atmosphere and its name, derived (so far as I could gather) from some mythical climbing trip. It was well after the appointed hour, but there was no sign of Eric, Dinesh and friends. I ordered a beer, took a seat next to the fire and waited. As time passed various groups came and went, increasingly raucous as the night wore on, but the Aussie-Nepalese contingent made no appearance. I felt increasingly despondent — this was not turning out to be one of my greatest New Year's Eves. I hadn't the will to muscle my way into one of the other groups, but staying by the fire provided little interest, as much of the conversation wasn't in English. My sombre mood must have been quite apparent, for a Frenchman leaned over and reassured me: "Don't worry, no-one's alone in Kathmandu". That did it. I stood up, drained my glass and set off for home; after 1½ hours, I decided, there was little chance of the others turning up. I was in bed by 9.30, a New Year's Eve record.

Day 150: Wednesday 1 Jan 92 Kathmandu

My despondency this morning was soon alleviated, firstly by the Guest House desk staff, now sporting smart new uniforms, who, to my complete surprise, handed me a letter:

"Dear respected resident, The entire staffs and myself wish you and your family a very happy New Year Nineteen Ninety Two. Yours faithfully, Bindu Sakyā, General Manager".

I smiled, and thanked the clerk. The usual corporate serious expression broke for a moment into a broad grin, raising my spirits a couple of notches. After a Mona Lisa porridge and a visit to the BA office (closed) another cheerful soul awaited me at the Guest House, this time in the shape of the mountain-bike hire man; his steeds were pretty good too. Outside the gates I met Chris, the younger of the two Australians. He confirmed the arrangements we'd made at our brief meeting on Monday regarding a trek. I'd decided that if my rucksack hadn't arrived by Saturday then I'd just go ahead and replace everything and charge it to my travel insurance. There was plenty of outdoor equipment for sale and for hire around Thamel, although the quality appeared somewhat variable.

Cycling always lifts my spirits with a sense of freedom and exhilaration its unique combination of travel and exercise provides. I set course out of the city through the eastern suburbs, retracing my first day's taxi ride. My destination this morning was the temple complex of Pashupatinath, Nepal's most holy of Hindu pilgrimage sites. It nestled in a wooded ravine by the Bagmati River, which fortuitously provided shelter from the noise of the airport and the sight of the golf course, both nearby.

I parked the bike and strolled down towards the river and Pashupatinath's main temple, the Pashupati Mandir. The street was lined with cafés and shops and the pavements were crowded with barrow stalls. They were not, however, catering to tourists, at least not Western tourists. They sold flower garlands, plastic necklaces, coloured powder and the whole multifarious paraphernalia of Hindu ritual; Nepalese and Indian pilgrims were their market sector. What a plastic crucifix was doing, therefore, amongst all the trinkets, jewellery and junk, I don't know. The street was a dead end, and lead directly into the Mandir. Entrance was for Hindus only, and a portly middle-aged soldier leaning on his rifle enforced the rule. I was allowed quite close to the gate, though, and could see clearly through to the temple courtyard and its huge brass statue of a kneeling bull — Nandi, Shiva's vehicle.

For those like myself, unfamiliar with Hinduism and hoping to acquire some understanding of it by visiting Nepal, exploring its temples and pilgrimage sites and perhaps taking in a festival or two — forget it. Compared with the world's monotheistic religions — Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or its spiritual philosophies — Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, or even the animistic

beliefs that often predate these, Hinduism appears utterly incomprehensible; chaotic, arbitrary and inconsistent. To stand any chance of understanding some background reading is essential. The *Collins Illustrated Guide to the Kathmandu Valley* is succinct: "Hindus have always believed that the totality of existence, including God, man and the universe, is too vast to be contained within a single set of beliefs. Their religion therefore embraces a wide variety of metaphysical systems or viewpoints, some mutually contradictory. From these, an individual may select one which is congenial to him..."

There are three main deities in Hinduism: Brahma, Vishnu (known as Narayan in Nepal) and Shiva. Each has different characteristics and roles. Somewhat simplistically: Brahma is the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Shiva the destroyer. Each has a consort and a mount, and appears in a multitude of different incarnations with a selection of trademark artefacts. Shiva is the most popular in Nepal, and is usually found accompanied by a trident (*trisuli*) and his mount Nandi the bull. It is he, in the form of Pashupati, Lord of the Animals, who is the principle deity at Pashupatinath.

I crossed the river by the footbridge. Clouds of smoke drifted upstream, carrying an unpleasant, familiar stench; immediately to the south cremations were taking place on the Ram Ghat. High up on the terraces opposite a group of tourists gawped and took photographs, while their young Nepalese chaperones stood around waiting, bored and listless. I climbed the main stairway past them, up to the Gorakhnath compound. It was very quiet, overgrown by the surrounding woodland and felt almost ruined and abandoned. A Nepalese couple ate their sandwiches while one or two tourists searched fruitlessly for something to photograph. It was a supremely peaceful, restful place, and quite unexpected. The path continued on the far side of the compound, down the hill through the trees to the river, which flowed east-west here. The red-brick building on the riverbank was, according to the guidebook, the Ghujeshwari Mandir. It appeared to be closed, and wasn't obviously a temple at all. There was no-one else around. I strolled in the sunshine along the riverside path towards the Guari Ghat. Away to the north-west I could see the Chabahil Stupa, another Swayambhu look-alike, towering over the surrounding suburb. As I approached the ghat I passed a carpet "factory". A handful of youngsters sat in doorways spinning or repairing their wheels, while outside their older colleagues were washing the finished product. They looked quite comical in their little wellington booties and shorts, scraping away at the wet carpets. A bridge crossed over to join the road back into Pashupatinath village, while the river turned south and entered the ravine.

I was relieved to find my bike where I'd left it, and rode back into town for lunch at Thamel's only Thai restaurant, *Him Thai*. The chicken with chilli and ginger was tasty enough to justify its premium Rs90 price, but could have been a little spicier for my taste.

My destination this afternoon was the last of the Kathmandu Valley's three major temple complexes: Baudha. I pedalled east again with anticipation; Baudha, or Bodhnath, was described as one of the largest and most important Tibetan Buddhist sites outside Tibet. It was not just a stupa, but an entire community, incorporating numerous monasteries and businesses, and was the chief focal point for the Tibetans-in-exile in Nepal. After my brief encounter at Pashupatinath I was keen to discover more about these people and their fascinating culture.

As I approached Baudha along the modern ribbon development that connected it with the Kathmandu ring road, the prospects were not encouraging. What appeared on the map as a distinct small village was now an industrial suburb, and far from possessing any aura of exotic Eastern mysticism it seemed most reminiscent of an English Black Country factory town. I followed the line of departing vehicles (it was now late afternoon and both tourists and pilgrims were returning home) through an anonymous gap in the line of roadside workshops and repair yards. The stupa was straight in front.

The stupa was utterly enormous. The vast white dome was raised up on three massive plinths, the first of which was fringed with flag poles. The familiar golden spire, with streaming prayer flags and all-seeing eyes, crowned the summit. The whole monument was ringed by an unbroken row of old houses and monasteries. Many of them were fronted by craft shops or cafés, giving a Tibetan-flavoured Thamel feel to the place. Of greatest interest to me were the people. Most of the pilgrims wore traditional dress of one sort or another; maroon was a popular colour, and for the women, rainbow-striped aprons and factory-knitted woollens. Prayer wheels and strings of beads were favourite accessories. I was uncertain about taking photographs of them. My usual technique of approaching directly and asking was difficult to employ, because almost everyone was shuffling in a continuous clockwise procession (circumambulating) and most either chanted, talked in groups or seemed otherwise absorbed in themselves — I hadn't the audacity to interrupt. Instead I crouched on the edge of the square and shot unnoticed with the telephoto lens, which felt almost like stealing and didn't anyhow produce particularly good results.

Buddhism, at least in the first instance, seems more coherent and self-consistent than Hinduism. It was founded by one man (historically a good move) whose teachings were based on four basic propositions: suffering dominates life; desire causes suffering; desire comes to an end in nirvana; nirvana is a state of bliss arising out of the extinction of self and the absorption into the supreme spirit. Individual morality is the means of achieving nirvana; it all seems simple enough. However, this ignores the influence of Hinduism: Siddhartha Gautama (a.k.a. the Buddha) accepted or reinterpreted the basic tenets of Hinduism and both religions share the concept of the union of the individual with the void as the end of existence. They also share temples and divinities; ask a Nepalese of the Kathmandu Valley if he is Hindu or Buddhist and the answer will most likely be "Yes". Following the mediaeval growth of Tantrism, both religions adopted a selection of its deities. Hence many Buddhist temples in Nepal (and Tibet) are decorated with pictures of bizarre multi-limbed demons as weird and wonderful as any to be found at a Hindu shrine.

But at least it all has a sound philosophical basis. And chanting.

I peered into one or two of the surrounding monasteries. All were dark, massed ranks of flickering butter lamps often providing the only illumination. It was never clear whether tourists were welcome or not, so I just observed from a few steps inside the doorways; there was seldom anyone around. In the lanes behind the main square many smart new monasteries had been recently built. But these were mostly hidden behind high walls and locked gates, while the muddy lanes outside were deserted and rubbish-strewn. I tired of Baudha surprisingly quickly; beneath the honest front of tourist enterprise there was clearly a healthy religious community, but the new development to the north hinted vaguely, to me at least, of something a little less wholesome. Perhaps it was just that a proper appreciation would have taken more than my single two-hour visit permitted.

Back in Thamel I met up with Chris for a budget dinner (of spaghetti) at *Alice's*. Afterwards we crossed over to the small *Bluetone* bar. They played a tasteful selection of jazz and blues tapes, but it was too loud and the place lacked atmosphere. So we finished off at the Rum Doodle, with a fair few beers and a number of "groggs", their hot toddy speciality. It was a much better end to the day than last night.

Days 151 & 152: Thursday 2 & Friday 3 Jan 92 Kathmandu

Following my conversations with Chris yesterday I now felt much more optimistic about getting away on a trek. Eric had some time before his return flight to Australia, so for a few days he and Chris were going with Dinesh up to Gosainkund Lakes; I was invited. Eric was prepared to return to Kathmandu alone while the rest of us continued on to the Langtang Valley, near the Tibetan border. It was not the grand adventure I'd envisaged, but a trek nonetheless. I still held out hope for the return of my rucksack, but was now prepared to go

without it. So for a couple of days I suspended the sightseeing and went equipment hunting. My aim was to find a supplier for everything I needed to replace, but leave the actual purchasing until the last minute, just in case. It wasn't a particularly enjoyable or memorable couple of days — it reminded me of our time in Cairo — and my journal entries for both days read simply "Shopping and visiting BA". On each of my numerous visits to his office Mr Thapa remained eternally optimistic, in his own sober way. I spent all of the time in-between in Thamel; a plain pair of winter-weight trousers, traveller-style with lace-up multi-coloured ankle cuffs cost me Rs180.

Besides clothing and equipment, even the most modest of expeditions in Nepal required paperwork. In my case this was a visa extension (my original lasted just 15 days) and a trekking permit. The combined applications had to be accompanied by foreign exchange bank receipts, to the value of \$480! This was a huge sum relative to Thamel living costs; hiring a trekking guide like Dinesh was about the only way I could think of spending the resulting wad of rupees, besides eating and drinking myself to death. Both documents entailed filling out tedious forms and standing in long queues at the Central Immigration office.

On Friday, while taking tea in Helena's, I got talking to an American girl who'd been travelling for 2½ years! She was attractive and interesting, and didn't talk incessantly about her experiences, like too many long-term travellers like to. I enjoyed her company and resented having to break off our conversation to keep an appointment with Eric and Dinesh, but I was determined now that nothing was going to get in the way of trekking. At the meeting Dinesh reckoned that on New Year's Eve they must have turned up at the Rum Doodle just after I left — typical. I was regaled with stories of rickshaw racing through the dark streets of Thamel and a party at the home of some well-to-do civil servant or other. Damn!

Day 153: Saturday 4 Jan 92 Kathmandu

On returning from breakfast at KC's this morning I found a message from Mr Thapa waiting for me. At his suggestion and with baited breath I telephoned the airport; my rucksack had arrived! I dashed straight outside and jumped into a taxi. As we motored out of the city the driver tried giving me the heavy sell about some Hindu festival that incorporated animal sacrifices, which would be absolutely fascinating and very cheap to get to in his taxi. "Maybe this afternoon..."; I wasn't very receptive. The airport official was a polite and well-spoken chap, quite friendly and an accomplished English speaker. He was keen to discover what I knew about Austin jeeps; not even what they looked like, I had to confess. We chatted as a minion went to fetch my rucksack. His brother was, like me, a computer programmer, who having completed his training in Britain now worked at the National Computer Centre in Kathmandu. My host was surprisingly optimistic about my chances of finding employment there, but did point out that as a foreigner I'd be taken on as a volunteer, on a salary of about Rs3000 a month — about half the Guest House tariff.

My rucksack, when it arrived, was filthy and covered in "official" graffiti; written in devanagari script and therefore quite credibility enhancing I decided, so long as no-one asked me what it meant. More distressing was unpacking the sack back at the Guest House and finding my Swiss Army knife missing, stolen from its leather pouch inside the top pocket — bastards. Later on, over a mid-morning cup of tea at the Pumpernickel Chris announced that he was too ill to come trekking. That was a shame, as I think I would have enjoyed his company. Lunch was with Eric and some Irish girls at one of the Tibetan restaurants in Thamel. Here I had my first taste of momos: small pasta-like dumplings, stuffed with vegetables and served with a hot chilli soup. They were delicious and very cheap, at just Rs20. For all the international culinary exotica on offer in Thamel, the Tibetan restaurants still

became my favourite; they were always friendly, unpretentious and good value, and the food tasty and wholesome.

I spent the afternoon acquiring trekking equipment. I was surprised to find a pair of apparently genuine Berghaus gaiters for sale. They're one of the premier European manufacturers and generally charge a correspondingly high price; these, however, were just Rs650 (£8.23), about half what I'd expect to pay at home. The "Made in Korea" tag suggested a possible explanation. I also hired a down-filled jacket at the very reasonable rate of Rs12 per day, although I had to leave a hefty Rs2500 deposit. Since we were trekking in winter, Dinesh and I went in search of ice axes; unsuccessfully, so we'd just have to be careful. We ended the day with Dinesh's brother Ganesh, Eric and Chris, drinking beer and finalising plans.

Day 154: Sunday 5 Jan 92 Dhunche

At 7.15 this morning the Guest House lobby was quiet. The desk clerk had been on duty for just 15 minutes but already there was a blazing fire in the hearth. He and I were the only ones around and I savoured the peacefulness and calm. Free of departing tour groups, lounging trekkers and the drone of newly acquired satellite TV⁴⁴, the place had a cosy, comfortable feel, a haven from the freezing thick fog outside. I'd bundled my belongings I wasn't taking into a rucksack-sized duffel bag, which I now stashed in the Guest House store room. Having obtained a heavy bunch of keys from its guardian, the porter made a complicated show of undoing the numerous padlocks and bolts on the small windowless room. It was piled high with guests' baggage, so perhaps the elaborate precautions were justified. Dinesh soon arrived, and together we went to meet the others and catch the bus.

The state of the vehicle, when it arrived, reminded me of the "deluxe" coach we'd taken in Rawalpindi. Perhaps it was a little better, since it didn't break down and we could hear ourselves speak; the passengers were certainly livelier and more colourful. Our rucksacks were lashed to the roof rack, Dinesh keeping a watchful eye on the porter's rope work. Once under way we quickly escaped the building-site suburbs and were soon trundling steadily alongside paddy fields, nosing our way confidently through the morning mist. I felt euphoric, on the move once more and free at last from the shackles of uncertainty over my rucksack which had confined me to the city. It wasn't long before we reached the edge of the Kathmandu Valley and started the long ascent into the hills. The road was a tortuous zig-zag, but a steeper, more direct route the bus would not have managed. Having scaled the 1860m Luchhe Danda (ridge) we spent the rest of the morning in sunshine, wheeling down through steep terraces, rustic roadside hamlets and occasional woodland; the once-continuous cover having long since been felled to make way for crops. We picked up and set down a few passengers along the way, including one woman who took up position on the floor in the aisle at the back. We hadn't taken her far before a stomach-churning stench began to filter down the vehicle – she'd been sick, all down her red cotton sari. The acidity of the smell was due to the raksi (home-distilled spirit) Dinesh reckoned she'd been drinking. The driver stopped the bus and she was helped off, with rather more sympathy than drunks in Britain generally receive.

There was no time to spare at Trisuli Bazaar. From the bus we marched straight over to lunch, and 15 minutes later back again – this was not Pakistan. In the busy concrete dining room our meals were before us within minutes. There was just one choice on offer: *dhal bhatt*, the national dish, eaten by Nepalese everywhere for almost every meal, it seemed. The stainless steel plate was divided into sections. The main part was occupied by a huge mound of boiled rice (the *bhatt*), while around the periphery assorted boiled and curried vegetables were arranged, plus of course, the dhal (lentil soup), in a separate bowl. The overall effect was surprisingly good; nutritious, filling (unlimited refills), cheap (a few rupees, although we

⁴⁴ Two channels were available: BBC World Service and Rupert Murdoch's *Star*.

were now spending from Dinesh's all-inclusive fee), and of course, genuine — it was a long way back to Thamel. As my Nepal travels unfolded I became something of a dhal bhatt connoisseur, and each subtle variance between one place and the next I compared and discussed. Eric and I ate our meals with a spoon, but Dinesh reverted to the Nepalese custom of using the right hand. I was slightly taken aback by this; until now I'd regarded him, I suppose, like a Westerner, dressed as he was in smart Western clothes, speaking English and carrying an expensive French rucksack. Over the coming weeks (and years) as I got to know him better I often wondered how he coped with this apparently dual identity.

The road north of Trisuli was unsurfaced and drove high and rough through coniferous forest, in Karakoram Highway-esque fashion a thousand metres above the river, straight towards the mountains and the Tibetan border. The scale of the landscape crept up on me unaware. The road out of Trisuli climbed no more steeply than the one we'd driven this morning, and I didn't notice how long we climbed for, but when we stopped we were more than vertical kilometre above the town. Twelve kilometres further north the Trisuliganga (river) turned north-east. I glanced to the left, to a distant horizon of snowcapped peaks. Ganesh Himal (7405m) was twenty or more kilometres away, yet still dominated the valley. We swung east into Dhunche and an utterly captivating vista of remote, snowcapped rock slid by the window — Tibet.

A little way before the village we'd stopped at the Langtang National Park ranger lodge and bought our entry permits (Rs250); Nepalese bureaucracy seemed to thrive of delicate slips of paper covered in unreadable scrawl and smudged, official-looking stamps. The large village of Dhunche was built on the side of a surprisingly steep hillside. Dinesh, of course, knew the best lodge, and we made our choice from the two or three clean but spartan rooms. Mid-winter was between seasons and the only other rucksacks in the place belonged to a couple of Dutch trekkers. We went downstairs, ate, and shared a few beers with them. It turned out a quite musical evening, as one of the Dutch guys had a harmonica, Dinesh the recorder he played (or flute, as he called it) and me my whistle (a new one, which I'd bought in Rotorua). Dinesh had an extensive repertoire of Nepalese folk tunes, surprisingly accessible to our Western ears, which contrasted nicely with the Dutch player's blues numbers and my few Irish dances. The sunset's orange-red wash infused a surreal tint to the border snow ridge, rounding off an auspicious start to the trip.

Day 155: Monday 6 Jan 92 Sing Gompa

Bright morning sunshine helped us on our way; by 8.30 we were strolling along an easy path, following the Trisuli Khola ravine eastwards as it climbed steadily through oak forest. Light streamed through the faint mist, silhouetting the trees and bringing an atmospheric luminescence to the woodsmoky cottages. We'd left the road from Dhunche continuing north-west, a hideous scar snaking its way up the hillside towards Ganesh Himal and some mineral deposits. It seemed an utter desecration invading this remote and beautiful landscape with motor traffic, industry and all the trappings of "civilisation" that inevitably accompany "development". When the lead and zinc deposits were exhausted would the army bulldoze the road, tear down the shanty towns and replant the forest? I doubt it. The trail running due north had for centuries been a trade route with Tibet; the upper reaches of the Trisuliganga were called the Bhote Kosi, the River from Tibet. Perhaps the quarry road might one day be extended, and the link resumed.

Higher up the Trisuli Khola the oak forest gave way to rhododendron. The dense evergreen bushes restricted the view to a few metres, and I wondered how high we'd have to climb before we'd escape their claustrophobic embrace. The answer was dramatic: the trail turned sharply north and soared straight up the side of the ravine, a vertical kilometre up what for the most part was a staircase. I'd always considered myself a little fitter than average, but this climb quickly shattered that delusion. Eric was a big bloke, with a strong back and long legs;

he took expansive strides with which he comfortably measured out the ascent. Dinesh seemed to have a physique more akin to my own, but appearances were never so deceptive. I could only assume he ran mountain marathons for the national team or something, for he seemed to be expending about as much effort as he would standing on an escalator. Half way up we met another trekking party coming down. The trekkers were Swiss, just five in number, but they marched past within a never-ending column of Nepalese: three guides (for majority voting when route-finding, perhaps?) and 16 porters! We exchanged pleasantries (in English) and Dinesh interrogated the guides for news of conditions higher up.

Although it was standard practise for trekking groups in Nepal to use porters, I'd not really considered it. We were to be staying in lodges and therefore not carrying much – well, it hadn't seemed like much when I'd packed – and I wanted to keep things small, simple and cheap. Moreover, I felt a certain unease about paying someone else to carry my bag. I felt I'd be flaunting our huge difference in material wealth and conferring upon myself a position and status I'd done nothing to deserve, besides having the good fortune to be born where I was. Furthermore, I'd also a certain arrogant pride in considering myself superior to the mollycoddled package trekkers, who needed armies of Nepalese to carry the Western food, camp beds and picnic tables without which they couldn't do.

It soon became clear to me, though, that such thinking was way out of line. With its widely scattered, mostly rural population, almost complete absence of roads and a landscape which, in the trekking regions at least, made even animal-powered transport often impractical, almost everyone in Nepal portered. All goods not made or grown locally, and anything that was and needed to be sold, had to be carried on someone's back. Hence Nepalese from an early age become adept at carrying huge, heavily laden baskets (*dokos*) up and down trails, suspended from a tumpline (*namlo*) placed around the forehead. Such carrying was done as a normal part of everyday life, just as a Westerner might drive a car; if some foreigner wanted to pay a week's wages per day for portering, then the average Nepalese subsistence farmer wouldn't worry too much about the implied ethics.

The rest had been most welcome, but we still had much further to climb; at least we'd exchanged the rhododendron for real (coniferous) woodland. We trudged ever upwards, past the modest army encampment at Chandan Bari. The Swiss party had warned of a threatened path closure today because of exercises, but there was no sign of activity and the path was open. Perhaps Dinesh had been allowing time for a detour here, but I was most surprised when, still in the early part of the afternoon, we emerged into a clearing and he declared the half-dozen buildings there to be Sing Gompa, our destination for the day. I was of course happy to have reached it, but also a slightly irked at having had to endure an unnecessarily rapid ascent.

Gompa is Tibetan for monastery, and indeed the place had a definite Tibetan air about it. From tall poles long, narrow prayer flags hung; three chortens, small Buddhist shrines, lined the path, while beyond them stood the gompa itself, sporting a miniature pagoda roof at one end. The gompa was deserted at the moment, the monks apparently having gone south for the winter. So far as I could tell there were two lodges here; a larger, more recent building behind our place was closed for the winter, and we were the only trekkers in town. The lodge was run by an attractive young woman of Tibetan origin – a *Bhote*, as all Nepalese folk of any such stock are called. It seems an interesting quirk of fate that facial features characteristic of their race corresponded to Caucasian notions of female beauty – high cheek bones, small nose and strong jaw line. This, combined with a taste for brightly coloured clothes, interesting ethnic jewellery and the cheerful disposition of most Nepalese may have explained the numerous stories of male trekkers forming liaisons with Bhote women. Dinesh told us of one German trekker who fell for a girl here at Sing Gompa. He arrived on trek and never left, until the government started tightening the visa regulations. In the end, I think, they got married and went off to Germany.

We sat around resting in the courtyard, admiring the view which the forest today had obscured. Several children were in the care of our landlady, one of which, a precocious little

brat, spent the afternoon chasing a couple of exceptionally cute puppies with a conviction that seemed to go beyond mere playfulness; fortunately for them they were quicker than he was, and the few roaming cats sufficiently wise to keep their distance. Later on we went for a short walk up the hillside behind the hamlet. The surrounding clearing had been created by the fire resulting from a lightning strike; a scattering of ghostly, burnt-out stumps covered an extensive tract of hillside. From its northern boundary we had far-reaching views west to the peaks of Ganesh Himal, floating in the sea of fog which had rolled in to herald the end of the day. After sunset we spent the evening sitting around the fire in the family living room, drinking beer and playing music. Dinner was a vegetarian selection (meat is an expensive luxury for most Nepalese), of rice, potatoes and some excellent cheese from the nearby factory, which had been set up some years ago with Swiss assistance. We were out of luck, or rather out of season, for some of the curd which Dinesh had raved about this morning.

We slept in our sleeping bags on rough beds upstairs in the building next door. Outside, the fog which had been lapping around the hamlet all evening had cleared to reveal a spectacular hemisphere of stars. The landscape was bathed in their cold, silvery light, brightly enough to discern the ridge of Gosainkund Lekh across the valley. What a magical place.

Day 156: Tuesday 7 Jan 92 Sing Gompa

We didn't set off until 8.30 this morning, despite a 6.30 alarm; something to do with last night's beer, perhaps. The going, to begin with, was quite easy, as we progressed eastwards through pine forest along the south side of the Chalang Pati Danda, before emerging into scrub and crossing over to the snow-covered north side. The views to the north were excellent. The air was clear and the sky blue, and it felt like we could almost reach out across the Langtang valley, its Khola obscured behind foreground ridges, and touch Langtang Lirung's 7246m summit. In the distance behind it the wall of jagged, snowcapped rock teeth stood guard at the edge of the Tibetan Plateau. Chalang Pati itself was just a couple of huts, where herders could obtain water and some enterprising locals operated a lodge in the season; this time of year it was closed and deserted. From here the path began the serious business of ascent. We entered a snow gully, very hard work in my lightweight nylon-and-suede boots, with their worn, soft soles. The uninhabited collection of wooden huts at Laurebina (3900m) marked a pass, or more accurately, a crossroads; turning left, the trail contoured north, towards upper Langtang. We ate our sandwiches outside the lodge and admired the view to the west, now stretching beyond Ganesh Himal to Manaslu (8156m), some 80km away. According to Dinesh, on a perfectly clear day the Annapurnas could be discerned, 140km distant; not as far-fetched as it sounded, in this landscape of such exaggerated scale.

Beyond Laurebina our surroundings of smooth grassland and wide vistas gradually gave way to bare rock and crowding mountains. As we climbed above 4000m the effects of altitude began to take hold on my body, just as they had in the Karakoram. My heart pounded, my lungs heaved and my legs felt like lead. The scenery compensated, as each lake came into view in turn; Saraswati Kund, Bhairav Kund and eventually, after a short scramble over the lip of the corrie, Gosainkund, at 4380m. We kicked our way down through thigh-deep snow to the small collection of stone buildings. There was a shrine to Shiva, marked with a miniature kneeling bull (Nandi), a trisul (trident) and a bell, which we each ran in turn. The place was deserted, like everywhere else we'd been today. It was in far contrast to the scene Dinesh described, of Janai Purnima, the pilgrimage held each August, when 20 to 30 thousand souls made the trek up here. It was unlucky to bring your wife, he added, ever since a shaman had fought a contest of magic with a snake up here — he'd perished because his wife had forgotten to finish the spell.

The lake was frozen and dusted with snow. We took turns standing by a prayer flag taking photographs, until Eric decided he could resist no longer and galloped out over the ice. The mad Antipodean was unmoved by our warnings and threats to leave him to drown should it break, so we sat and munched our sandwiches and hoped Shiva felt benevolent. The walk back down was of course much quicker and more relaxed, and I made plenty of photo stops. We reached Sing Gompa in the late afternoon and had an early dinner. At 6 o'clock Eric went straight off to bed; I think he was pining for the girlfriend he'd left behind in Australia. Dinesh and I went back in the house for another evening of drinking and conversation. The room was dark and smoky, lit by the light of the fire and a few paraffin lamps. The children went off to bed at intervals, and the landlady and her mother talked and joked as they pottered about the room. I downed a couple of beers and soaked up the atmosphere, while my boots steamed away gently by the fire. Dinesh translated the best jokes but kept best scandal to himself; to spare their embarrassment or his, I don't know, but it still beat television, any day.

Day 157: Wednesday 8 Jan 92 Syabru

This morning marked the parting of our ways: Eric was returning to Dhunche for a bus back to Kathmandu and his plane home, while Dinesh and I were turning north towards Langtang. Both parties had easy downhill walks ahead, so we seized the opportunity for a lie-in, eventually waving goodbye at around 10.30. The morning was bright and clear, with a distinct nip in the air. We walked through sparse pine forest, crunching our way over frost-encrusted snow. On the east side of the Phulung Danda we began our descent, losing over the course of the morning all of the thousand metres we'd hauled ourselves up on Monday. We met a few other folk along the way: a French girl and her guide en route to Sing Gompa, and a group of local women, admiring the view from the Mountain View lodge at Dursagang – and what a view it was.

The final descent into Syabru wound steeply through heavily terraced hillsides, brown and fallow this time of year. Little barns and farmhouses dotted the fields, stone-built with slate roofs or ingeniously constructed from bamboo matting and raised up on stilts. The village itself snaked along the crest of a sharp ridge, like a caterpillar draped over a twig. The line of buildings had been extended in recent years, testimony to Syabru's location at the crossroads of the Langtang trekking routes. The new houses were easily distinguished from up here by their shiny corrugated-steel roofs, readily imported these days along the new road to Dhunche. We passed beneath a clutch of tall prayer flags at the edge of the village, confirming our presence still very much in Bhote country. The recent proliferation of lodges had been in response to peak-season demand – autumn and spring – so at this time of year there was huge overcapacity. I was a little surprised and disappointed at Dinesh's choice of accommodation: the *Stars Lodge* was not the most attractive place, not the one I would have chosen and not the one the handful of other trekkers here had chosen. It was the village lama's house, who with his assistants was getting ready for a forthcoming ritual to rid the village of a ghost. I was treated with friendly disinterest as everybody was fully occupied with the preparations, making amongst other things rows and rows of *tormo* – small figurines and butter lamps, moulded from flour-and-water paste of several colours. They were quite detailed and intricate.

I was the only trekker at our lodge, so while Dinesh caught up with the local gossip I went to explore the village. Opposite the Stars a gang of labourers were taking advantage of the lull in trekking and farming activity to construct yet another lodge. It was a substantial yet well-proportioned affair, built at considerable expense but sure to grab a large slice of the trade – the architect clearly knew what would appeal to Westerners' taste. Most of the current trekking population were staying at the *Sherpa Lodge*: four Brits, four French and two guys of indeterminate origin, later identified as Israelis. Dinesh explained that since an Israeli passport barred one from many interesting countries (anywhere Arabic or Muslim, I should

imagine), Nepal had become a favourite destination for them. Nevertheless, they'd allowed themselves to get a reputation for arrogance towards the locals and obnoxious, unruly behaviour in general. It did, however, explain the strange writing on one of the lodge signs. At the lower, older end of the village many of the houses bore fine examples of traditional Nepalese carving – intricate, attractive and quite unique. It was a shame the builders of the new lodges had seen fit to avoid the expense; I hoped the tradition wouldn't succumb completely to market forces.

Despite its lower elevation (2200m, compared with 3250m), Syabru was colder than Sing Gompa, occupying as it did a north-running ridge rather than a south-facing hillside. So we retreated indoors at dusk, and after dinner played a few rounds of *Ballot*, a French card game Dinesh had learnt. Before turning in I took the key and walked a little way up the east side of the ridge to the toilet shack. Through a gap in the cubicle's wooden walls I took in the view: a breathtaking vista of sharp snow-peaks, clear but ghostly in the moonlight. It had been an easy day today, and we weren't really ready to sleep at 9 o'clock. I read for a while, and Dinesh played his recorder. It seemed a simple tune, so I got my whistle out and followed his playing, which he patiently repeated several times. And that was how I collected my first folk tune – a wedding song, or was it a lullaby, of unknown name from East Nepal. With much satisfaction I put the instrument away and pulled up the hood on my sleeping bag, and closed my eyes. Ten minutes later, like a distant echo from the north, the most other-worldly sound I'd ever heard filled our little room. A deep, sonorant voice, a chant of indistinguishable, strange words welled up from the depths of the building. The hairs on the back of my neck bristled; I opened my eyes and stared blankly into the darkness. Bouts of crashing symbols and manic drumming interleaved the stanzas; other performers may have joined in – the voice had such resonance. On occasions in the past I'd closed my eyes listening to music and with little effort been transported to strange, far-off places. Now my eyes were wide open, the far-off place was right here and as for the music...! Immediately it finished, or perhaps a little beforehand, I fell into a deep, peaceful sleep, the best yet of the trip.

Day 158: Thursday 9 Jan 92 Tibetan Hotel

Narrow shafts of sunlight were edging their way gingerly round the room. I was half awake, turning over the sounds of last night in my mind; had it been real, or had there been something in my tea? As if in reply to my thoughts the chanting began again, less alien-sounding this time, less intense; indeed, the most pleasant of alarm calls. Over breakfast the lama (I never did discover his name) apologised for the noise, and hoped it hadn't kept me awake too long! What could I say? I certainly wouldn't question Dinesh's choice of lodge again.

We started the day by completing our descent into the Langtang Khola. We wound our way down through the fields and into the forest. The valley we were dropping into was more of a gorge, really, and a rather deep one at that – the sides were 2km high. The trail contoured precariously along a stretch of bare hillside. A few years earlier this section had collapsed into the river, taking the entire forest with it; the Himalaya are still very much under construction. The last part of trail was the steepest, and muddy, too. Our cautious progress was mocked by groups of chattering monkeys, grey-coated with white beards completely encircling their elfin black faces. Each time I raised my camera they scattered into the branches, just far enough to deny me a photograph, but still visible, still watching. Little sods.

The south side of the river was dark and damp, being in the almost continuous shadow of the ravine's steep sides. The dense forest was mixed: large pines interspersed with oak and rhododendron, and a little higher up, bamboo. Dinesh pointed out the native bird life, and on a cliff opposite, bee hives of the variety featured in the recent *Honey Hunters of Nepal* book and television documentary. Large orange slabs, like giant scallop potatoes, they were unlike

any hive I'd seen before. Numerous tea shops (*bhattis*) lined the trail. They served not just the trekkers but also the substantial numbers of porters engaged in supplying the lodges higher up. They'd invariably been given unimaginative English names; our first stop this morning was at *Bamboo* (which was, I concede, built from bamboo, but then so were most buildings in this part of the valley). We hadn't been going long and I was in no urgent need of refreshment, but Dinesh remarked somewhat pointedly how attractive the girl running it was. For the next fifteen minutes his English translations were less than forthcoming.

The climb through the forest was steady but not arduous. By a small suspension bridge the trail crossed to the north side of the river. Each bank sported a tea shop, collectively named, surprisingly enough, *Riverside*, and we stopped at the south one for a spot of lunch. Afterwards, the north side was lighter and dryer, and the forest a little less dense and a little more pleasant to walk in. The trail stuck near the river for a while, sky blue and fast flowing and a welcome distraction from the endless trees. A short climb led to tonight's lodge, just short of Chongong (or *Tibetan Hotel* — Dinesh referred to it by the name of the lodge there).

Our lodge was built from stone and furnished entirely with bamboo. On the outside wall a large tin can had been flattened and painted with the menu. It was representative of most Langtang lodges:

Potatoes Cheep	Fried Potatoes	Onion Soup
Hot Drink	Champa Porridge	Egg Soup
Hot Lemon	Champa Porridge With Jam	Rara Soup
Hot Chocolate	Veg Fried Rice	Waiwai Soup
Double Potato Omelette	Egg Fried Rice	Drink Tea
Noodle Soup	Rice Pudding	Black Tea
Porridge With Jam	Potato Momo	Milk Tea
Tibetan Bread	Veg Momo	Milk Coffee
Chapati With Jam	Veg Chowmein	Black Coffee
Pancake With Honey	Potato Soup	
Plain Pancake	Veg Soup	EVERYTHING CLEAN
Pancake With Butter	Tomato Soup	NICE PLACE
Potato Roll	Chicken Soup	
Boiled Potatoes	Mushroom Soup	

As was often the case, the momo was off.

We were now five nights out of Kathmandu and I was in pressing need of a serious wash. Outside the building a cubical had been constructed from bamboo matting. The lady of the lodge heated me a bowl of water, and as the afternoon sun dipped below the horizon, in the chill mountain air I had the most invigorating of all "showers". Not even the most decadent of Kathmandu's five-star hotels sported open-air bathrooms with mountains en suite.

The refreshing effects of my shower were almost completely nullified, however, by the most sleepless and tormented night of the entire trip. In the early evening the proprietress departed, leaving the lodge in the care of a couple of children. Presently a group of ten child porters arrived, dumped their loads and took up positions in the kitchen. There they stayed until the early hours of the morning, talking and giggling incessantly. Up on the hillside above the lodge a group of *nak* (cow-yak cross) herders had set up camp. Later that night, after we'd gone to bed, they came down to occupy the hut nearest the lodge and proceeded to throw a party. They launched into a never-ending round of repetitive Tibetan songs, sung at the tops of their voices; and they didn't even invite us in. In retrospect I should have got Dinesh to gate-crash it for us. Finally, the dog chained up outside the window decided that if he couldn't sleep then neither would anyone else, and joined in the singing. At some point I must have fallen asleep, because I remember waking up — at 5 a.m., with diarrhoea. The toilet, as at all lodges, was a hole in the ground within a wooden shack outside; an hour before dawn the air was very still, and intensely cold.

The children were up at 6.30 and soon back into their stride. I struggled on trying to sleep, but after an hour or so gave up and resigned myself to the day.

Day 159: Friday 10 Jan 92 Langtang

As our trek progressed, the further from the road we got, the more expensive imported commodities became. Chief amongst these were beer and mineral water (I rarely drank unbottled water, and always dosed it with Puritabs when I did), which, quite reasonably, were not included in Dinesh's fee. The asking price to fill my water bottle this morning was an exorbitant Rs100 — almost the price of Perrier water back home; I declined, and paid Rs70 at the next lodge *up* the valley.

The trail was noticeably steeper this morning, and as we climbed the forest began to thin out, although the *Lama Hotel* lodge at Chonging was still in perpetual semidarkness. By the river this morning we passed a party of bamboo cutters waiting for their load to be inspected by the National Park authorities (i.e. the army). It was reassuring to see the regulations, in this instance at least, being properly enforced. Many parts of Nepal are textbook examples of a rising population and an influx of tourists bringing about severe deforestation, resulting in rapid soil erosion, irrigation problems and the loss of wildlife habitat, as well as the source of building materials and fuel.

As we progressed further we came across several more bhattis, and downed a quick glass at each. Nepalese drink their tea (*chai*) white and very sweet. I take mine without sugar, and although I can tolerate a little of the stuff, the concentrations we usually faced made me wince, furred up my teeth and invariably had me reaching for my water bottle ten minutes later. At each halt I asked Dinesh to order it without sugar, or, having in desperation had him teach me the Nepali phrase, asked myself. Each time the order was accepted and seemingly understood, but each time back came a glass of hot, supersaturated sugar solution, with tea and milk in it. Several days passed before I realised they weren't just being uncooperative; Nepalese tea shops made their brew by boiling up all the ingredients together — water, tea, milk and sugar were thrown into the urn as one. Only in Thamel was it made in pots, to order, to be sold at several times the tea shop rate. At one lodge I was offered rather more than mere liquid refreshment: it was run by an acquaintance of Dinesh's, who invited me to take my pick from the group of young Nepalese girls resting there! They were too young, I replied, but he couldn't see the problem. Dinesh translated our English for the girls, who giggled and blushed, while the three of us engaged in scholarly debate on the comparative merits of Nepalese and British approaches to personal relationships.

Further up the valley the forest gave way to scrub oak, home to another colony of monkeys, and eventually petered out altogether. At the army checkpoint at Ghora Tabela my trekking and national park entry permits were inspected, and from the log book we established the identity of the others trekking up the valley: four Australians, four French and one Japanese. Beyond Ghora Tabela the character of the valley changed markedly. The valley floor opened out into a classic glaciated U-shape, and some of the surrounding high peaks came into view — we had our first glimpse of Langtang Lirung for a couple of days. The houses became Tibetan in character: smaller, squat and heavy, windowless and surrounded by small fields enclosed by stone walls. Herds of yaks dotted the hillsides, and the people were different too: darker, and dirtier — “smelling like yaks”, according to Dinesh. We were still climbing and my rucksack was beginning to weigh me down; perhaps I'd hire a porter for the return journey. Our destination today was Langtang village, and at a lodge on the trail just before it we caught up with the French party, who were staying there. Little was said besides hello, bonjour or namaste.

Langtang village is a compact collection of stone buildings set amidst the fields. We checked in at the *Village View Hotel*, the best lodge in town. It was owned by local tycoon and lodge magnate Rengin Dorge, whom we'd passed a few days earlier on his way down the valley, accompanied by a couple of lackeys. He was unusual for a Nepalese, especially outside the capital, in being rather overweight — quite rotund, in fact. He was the butt of numerous jokes, but every lodge manager knew what was required when he came visiting: free beer and plenty of good food, and his every need accommodated. His Langtang lodge was a solid place, patronised tonight by the Australians and some Swedes, plus an Englishman from Stone in Staffordshire who snored all night like an asthmatic yak. The lone (but for his Nepalese entourage) Japanese trekker had pressed on through the village and camped further on.

Day 160: Saturday 11 Jan 92 Kyanjin Gompa

My journal described setting off this morning in “yet more blue skies and sunshine”; perhaps I was becoming a little blasé. We climbed gently, passing along the way some Mani walls, built down the middle of the trail. Dinesh directed me past on the left-hand side, consistent with a clockwise circumambulation. Along their length they were inscribed with Buddhist mantras, often “Om mani padme hum”, which the faithful, Dinesh explained, repeated 108 times, counting on strings of beads. At each end of the walls elaborate circular engravings were positioned — *mandalas*, mystic cosmograms used in meditation.

As the morning wore on more impressive peaks came into view, but soon disappeared again as cloud rolled in. Nevertheless, I was still becoming aware of the change in geography and culture — high mountains and wild pasture, Tibetans and Buddhism — and felt again the welcome anticipation of the unfamiliar. The final approach to Kyanjin Gompa, made around lunchtime, for it wasn't far from Langtang, was through a wilder landscape of glacial moraine and meltwater streams. For the most part the sky was now completely overcast, so I got no hint of the high peaks and glaciers the valley floor suggested. However, at the moment we arrived at Kyanjin Gompa the cloud briefly parted, to reveal a dramatic southern wall of jagged arêtes and sharp pinnacles, grey snow-rock Gothic sculptures stacked up one behind the other, leading the eye up valley to the imposing apparently-vertical ice wall of Gangchempo (6387m). Set apart from the other mountains and assuming a stature beyond what its modest height might normally command, its entire west face was a symmetric triangle of folded ice — Tilman's “Fluted Peak”.

There were three lodges at Kyanjin Gompa, from which Dinesh selected the *Yala Peak*, possibly the best of the trek, full toilets notwithstanding (they were partially frozen, which reduced their offensiveness considerably, and reminded me of Jiayuguan railway station). Yala Peak was the name of the nearest significant summit (5500m), which Dinesh and I had discussed with a view to exploring during the few days we'd allotted to the upper valley.

The gompa itself was on the slopes behind the lodge, and in the afternoon I went to take a look. It was closed for the winter, although I did notice a solitary monk roaming about outside. Later on I passed a tiny cottage built into the side of the hill, from which a steady column of wood smoke rose and the sound of chanting and drums emanated. I climbed up to a chorten behind the gompa and was rewarded with a wide panorama of the village and surrounding valley floor, and the frustration at having left my camera in the lodge. While up there the first few flakes of snow began fluttering from the sky, so I made my way back to the lodge. By 3 o'clock it was looking like it had set in for a heavy fall, which was still under way when I went to bed. There hadn't been many trekkers up here recently, so the proprietor of the nearby cheese factory had returned to Langtang. The lodge, however, had its own stocks and I enjoyed an excellent cheese chow mein dinner, and numerous mugs of rum and hot chocolate throughout the evening. Dinesh's friend we'd met on Friday (the one who'd offered me the girls) arrived on horseback in the late afternoon, followed by a few near-

hypothermic porters. Again, Dinesh provided my instant introduction to the local scene and I enjoyed both sets of company, Nepalese and trekkers, as I alternated between kitchen and dining room fires.

Day 161: Sunday 12 Jan 92 Ghora Tabela

We awoke this morning to a landscape transformed: a 20cm mantle of snow blanketed the valley, drifting deep against the stone walls of the silent village and coating all but the most sheer of mountainsides. Icicles fringed the lodge's overhanging roof, and from the door the only path beaten cut a straight deep furrow to the toilet shack and no further. The sky mirrored the valley floor in an intense white backdrop of mist, with the occasional summit poking tantalisingly above.

Over breakfast Dinesh and I discussed the possibilities. Shod with just lightweight fabric boots and ill-fitting gaiters, we were not equipped for battling along paths buried deep in snow, let alone climbing any sort of mountain; today, at least, we were going no further. The consensus in the kitchen was that more snow was a distinct possibility. If we chose to wait for a thaw we could be here for several days, not an enticing prospect with so little to do. I was acutely aware of my limited time left in Nepal (just 2½ weeks), and was especially keen to make something of it following my week's confinement to Kathmandu. So I decided to cut my losses and retreat back down the valley; with good progress we should be back in the capital with enough time remaining for another trip into the mountains somewhere else.

Despite our desire to make haste we did not hurry breakfast. A tactical measure to ensure the Australian party and returning porters got away first, it paid handsomely, and we walked all morning on freshly compacted snow between the deep drifts of loose powder. Soon after leaving Kyanjin the sky cleared and we enjoyed splendid vistas of an again-unfamiliar landscape. Our pace was brisk, though, and I'd frustratingly little time for photography; some water-powered prayer wheels were about the only subject I snapped. We took lunch in Langtang village, back at the Village View Hotel, and then pressed on. In the afternoon it clouded over again and the snow began to melt; we kicked on through the slush, getting colder and tired, until we arrived at Ghora Tabela just before dusk.

The lodge didn't offer much cheer, despite possessing the hottest stove in the valley; my boots dried in just two hours and in a moment of neglect I ruined a pair of socks, and later burnt my fingers. The building's dry stone walls did little to impede the chill wind, so we rarely ventured away from the source of warmth. The proprietor of the lodge was the same guy who'd been up to Kyanjin on horseback yesterday and had offered me the girls on Friday. He was young, about 16, I'd guess, and with a definite attitude problem. He continually felt the need to impresses, telling endless smutty jokes and stories in a fast, difficult to understand English. We were the only ones staying in this cold, dark hovel, so with no-one else to talk to and not wishing to leave the fire, I had to endure him all evening. The jokes weren't even funny. Dinesh, however, held him some esteem, for having been so successful in business at such an early age. I had an early night, and did at least sleep well, on a raised platform within a compartment of bamboo matting, which formed an effective shield against the cold draft.

Day 162: Monday 13 Jan 92 Syabru

An early start saw us skating out into a cold crisp morning, under clear skies and sunshine over a frozen landscape of still-life slush. We crunched off down the valley at a determined pace, and by the time we'd completed the steeper descent before Lama Hotel the snow had given way to frost, which quickly melted in the warming day. We stopped for tea at Tibetan Hotel and I began to have second thoughts about our decision; I've always felt drawn to high

mountains and remote places and it hurt to have turned my back on them so quickly. Up the valley I had my final glimpse of the white-dusted peaks of Langtang, while to the west I could discern the lower reaches of Syabru, tumbling off the end of its ridge. It wasn't far above us now, but to get there today we'd first have to lose another 500m and then regain it.

A few kilometres further into the forest we arrived at the Riverside bridge, and stopped at the southern tea shop for lunch; Dinesh, I think, rather fancied the girl who ran it. As we strolled through the forest afterwards the conversation flowed freely. Dinesh was becoming more forthcoming with the valley gossip now: the girl at the Riverside lodge had been married before, to a soldier, but he'd beaten her and they had parted after just five months. Dinesh conceded she was attractive, but he'd also heard that she "entertained" numerous passing guides. Now she wanted to return to Kathmandu. Dinesh reckoned that what he needed was a wife in some remote place, out of temptation's reach while he was away guiding.

The climb out the valley, preceded by yet another tea stop run by clutch of young women, was long and hot, but we maintained a steady pace and made it in good time. Dinesh commented as much, which I found encouraging since I think he'd found the trip so far about as challenging as a stroll to the shops. We stayed in Syabru with the lama again, who was now in the final day of his ritual.

I dumped my rucksack in the empty lodge and went for a look around. There were even fewer trekkers in the village than five days ago – just a couple of Swedes and a stereotypically large and loud-but-inoffensive American lady with her Nepalese guide and porter. It was her birthday today, so we helped her celebrate with a few beers. Then she produced a half bottle of whisky she'd picked up at Moscow airport⁴⁵ and insisted we all joined her in a toast. Back at the Stars, where we were again the only guests, the lama apologised in advance for the noise. This time he added, though, would we like to watch?

We shuffled down a narrow upstairs corridor between the bare wooden walls partitioning the trekkers' rooms, converted recently from dormitories in response to village competition. In a small room at the back of the house three or four adults and a few of Nepal's omnipresent children had gathered. Along one wall an altar had been constructed, laid with red cloth and covered in a collection of brass butter lamps, incense burners, beads and conical mounds of rice. A variation on tormo took centre stage, brightly coloured and finely detailed, but completely abstract and quite unlike that which I'd seen being made last week. The whole thing was draped with katas, fine white scarves traditionally given to lamas by visiting pilgrims. Small thankas, mandala-like pictures, were strategically positioned about the altar, and larger ones hung from the walls. Several rows of rectangular boxes stacked up end-on formed the backdrop to the altar. They contained the collection of prayer books, in scroll form or printed on cloth, that constituted the lama's formidable annual reading list. He had a few open in front of him from which he periodically chanted, accompanied sporadically on a large, ornately carved drum which hung from the ceiling, and various small brass percussion. A couple of shawms lay discarded by the altar.

While I sat by the door the ceremony proceeded; chanting reverberated off the walls and drums and shawms took turns at assaulting our eardrums. The whole experience I found mesmerising; the concentration of sights, sounds and smells crammed into that one small space was quite intoxicating. Just in case it wasn't, there was plenty of raksi and chhang at hand. The former was an evil hooch with the strength and flavour of sweetish gin, while the latter was the thick barley fermentation from which it was distilled. My tumbler was filled to the brim with raksi and Dinesh described how impolite it would be of me not to drink it all. After I'd finished it (and not before!) he explained it would be impolite of my host not to refill it; but since I was a trekker I'd be spared the formality. With the lama's permission I took a

⁴⁵ Aeroflot are usually the last direct-to-Kathmandu carrier to fill up, and are also one of the cheapest.

few photos, with and without flash⁴⁶, but the results were predictably bad. The memory, however, continues in awe.

In combination with the beer and whisky I'd had earlier, the raksi just about finished me off. I walked out onto the balcony at the back of the house for some fresh air, and took in the panorama of star-lit mountains while the chanting swirled about me. Never had I experienced anything like this — what a way to round off the trip. I teetered back to our room and crashed out into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Day 163: Tuesday 14 Jan 92 Dhunche

The last day of our trek, but I didn't feel sad. Last night's proceedings had amply compensated for the earlier curtailment of our little expedition and had, I suppose, rounded it off as a more complete experience of Nepal than what a few extra days in the mountains would have done. We ate an unhurried breakfast and said our goodbyes, before setting off west from the top of the village.

After half an hour of gentle climbing we stopped for a breather. We were contouring round the Phulung Danda (which we'd descended last Wednesday on our way from Sing Gompa) and were out on a small spur, giving us just sufficient clearance to see over the surrounding pine forest. Turning back east the view was dramatic: straight up the Langtang Khola, like staring up the barrel of a gun, so steep, so deep and so straight did it run. The sheer scale of the gorge was apparent for the first time: we could see clearly the river, 1500m above sea level before us, rising a vertical kilometre before turning north-east out of view. Spurs running down from the surrounding hillsides had been viciously truncated, including, in front of us, Syabru's, with its silver icing of corrugated roofs. The jagged outline of the snowcapped Langtang peaks formed the skyline; hence before us lay the object of our whole week's endeavour.

We continued round the danda, turning southwards to be greeted by more superb views, west this time, towards Ganesh Himal. We passed a shiny new gompa, recently completed with foreign aid, and negotiated a washed-out bridge, not yet rebuilt following the summer's monsoon; we met no-one else on the trail. Following a long, steep descent we joined the quarry road at Bhargu for the last couple of kilometres into Dhunche. As we approached the village we encountered a commercial (i.e. run by a foreign tour company) trekking party. They'd stopped for lunch, and were now packing up. Besides the solitary Japanese guy and the small Swiss group, whose parties had been strung out along the trail, this was the first large commercial outfit I'd seen. They had the full works: guides, cooks and cook boys, and all the mess tents, chairs, tables and cushions necessary to make camping the least hardship possible (and the least like my backpacking-inspired notion of what it was about). A small army of porters were employed to carry it all, and all the food and equipment needed by the cooks, porters and guides. Dinesh knew the sidar (the guide in charge) and we stopped for a chat. Well, he stopped for a chat, for as was the custom the trekkers themselves had gone off in front and left the staff to get on with it, expecting them to catch up later. We'd passed them on the way down: a mixed bunch of first-time youngsters and maybe-last-time older folk, struggling on the first stages of the climb. We were too late for some of the trekkers' food, but there was plenty of dhal bhatt left; well, plenty of rice, anyway. A few of the local children were still hanging around the day's main distraction, so I snapped one or two and chatted to some of the staff. The porters couldn't linger, though, for they had the trekkers to catch. No great challenge I thought, judging by what I'd seen of them, until I saw the size of the porters' loads. They were incredible — if I'd not seen for myself the huge pile of mattresses and kit bags one guy in particular picked up I'd not have believed it possible. Then he embarked on the climb to Syabru!

⁴⁶ On Fujicolor 1600ASA bracketed ± 1 stop.

We were back in Dhunche by early afternoon. We checked in at the lodge and I took a very welcome shower, in a hut in the back yard equipped with *running* hot water! I was unpacking afterwards when the peace was shattered by a familiar cacophony of drums, shawms and cymbals. A grabbed my camera and went to investigate. Behind one of the nearby buildings a large crowd had gathered, and preparations for something special were clearly well advanced. Some of the men were dressed in bright outfits of colourful silk gowns and tall, crescent-shaped pointed hats, while the women wore their ordinary clothes adorned with their best beads and necklaces. Soon the procession began to move off. I took up position in the alleyway with my camera, but it was dark in the deep shadow of the huddled buildings. Some women passed beneath me carrying large basket plates on their heads, laid with a selection of pulses, rice, popcorn, fruit and bread, arranged in a regular pattern around a single, central incense stick. Out on the street the procession marched to the edge of the village. One older chap was clearly the focus of events. He was dressed in a bright yellow silk gown and pointed red hat, and carried a small hand bell. While other uniformed participants danced their intricate steps and the musicians marched up and down playing, he ran in and out of the houses, rarely waiting for a reply at the door. He appeared to be chased from the buildings as often as not, amid much rice throwing and shouting. I was utterly captivated, and it was nearly over before I realised that only one other foreigner had witnessed the event – privilege indeed. The proceedings moved on to a private courtyard down the hill, and I returned to the lodge. I couldn't believe my luck, and neither could Dinesh; the advantage of trekking out of season, perhaps.

Days 164–168: Wednesday 15 Jan – Sunday 19 Jan 92 Kathmandu

The journey back to Kathmandu was a relaxed affair, my main recollection being of the incessant Indian pop music blaring from the bus radio. Radio Nepal seemed to operate a “play list” policy like BBC Radio 1, broadcasting a limited selection of the most catchy songs repeatedly throughout the day. I'd learnt several (Hindi) choruses by the time we reached the capital.

I spent the next few days in the city ostensibly looking for companions for another trek, but in reality just doing my washing and mellowing out. I went to the police station in Durbar Square to report the theft of my Swiss Army knife and pick up a receipt for my travel insurance claim. I think the Kathmandu police had become a little jaded by too many travellers using this as a revenue-raising scheme. They were friendly enough and accepted my explanation for my delay in reporting the theft, but still insisted I waited a couple more days in case it turned up (or in case I lost my nerve?) When I did return it was to a slightly cynical interview:

“Okay, how much was it worth then? Eighty dollars? A hundred? A hundred and twenty?”

“Err, no, not that much. I paid 22 pounds for it, I think”. I converted the sum to dollars.

“How much?! Are you sure?”

I think that the Kathmandu police had got a slightly false impression of what these things were worth – the most expensive cost only £50. The police, quite understandably, couldn't check the price abroad of every item every tourist reported lost or stolen, and equally well the insurance companies probably didn't bother either, on what to them would be small fodder. Altogether an easy scam to pull, so no wonder values had got exaggerated. Given what I'd spent on the trip so far, and the size of my accumulated insurance claim, I saw little point in trying it on. Still, I couldn't just take the report away with me but would have to return in five days' time to collect it; I'd just have to get back early enough from my next trek.

With no trekking companions forthcoming I decided to go with just Dinesh. He, I think, would have preferred a (more profitable) group, but this seemed unlikely with Kathmandu

noticeably less busy than two weeks ago. Given the short time remaining (8 days) and the expected seasonal snowfall, I accepted his proposal of a straightforward trip to see the view from Poon Hill, south of Annapurna Himal, in Western Nepal. Again, I had to queue for a (six-day) trekking permit, plus a conservation area entry permit and a one-day visa extension. The published foreign exchange certificate requirement for these was \$20 per day, so I was relieved to be asked for just \$50 worth (compared with \$480 last time) – I really couldn't have spent many more rupees.

Day 169: Monday 20 Jan 92 Pokhara

I was out of bed by 5.30 this morning, and when Dinesh arrived at 6.20 I was warming myself in front of the blazing lobby fire. I'd booked us seats on the "tourist" bus to Pokhara, a smaller and more comfortable vehicle than the ordinary one, and charging a premium rate. We joined the shadowy groups of travellers and Nepalese on the pavement outside the Central Immigration office. We stamped our feet and warmed our hands on cups of scalding tea, while peering through the fog for signs of our late-running bus. It made no appearance though, so eventually Dinesh went to *Oshi World Tours*, the travel agency, to investigate. The news wasn't good: the luxury coach had been cancelled and we'd been downgraded to an ordinary bus. Even on this, however, our reserved front-row seats had already been taken. We accepted places up front in the cabin as the next best alternative, but it was rather cramped.

The old Tata bellowed and shook like a recalcitrant elephant and belched clouds of thick black diesel smoke into the early morning mist. Progress was steady, rather than rapid, and we stopped for a break half an hour after leaving the city. As the passengers sipped tea the driver crawled under the coach's back axle and started pounding away with a lump hammer – not a very reassuring sight.

The road between Kathmandu and Pokhara was being rebuilt with British and Chinese aid. A small section after the tea stop had been completed and was sheer luxury to drive on. Then we hit the road works. I will never again complain about motorway lane closures and hold ups, for they are infinitely preferable to the alternative adopted here: driving through the building site. The road crews were literally constructing the new road on top of the old one, underneath the wheels of the traffic which continued to use it. For hour after hour we struggled over mounds of earth, laboured through ditches and flood water and scrambled over hard core and rock falls. The bus heaved and pitched and threw its occupants from one side to the other. Average speed was reduced to single figures, and much of the time was spent stationary. When we stopped for lunch at Mugling the bus parked next to a couple of recently imported Landrovers. From the markings on the driver's door I could see they were from the British contingent of the road building effort, and I contemplated trying to hitch a ride.

After lunch the road returned to the normal Nepalese state, of bumpy and narrow but serviceable. We arrived at Pokhara at 4.30 p.m., nine hours after setting out on the 200km journey. As the bus pulled to a halt it was mobbed by a crowd of eager and at times quite pushy lodge and taxi touts, something I experienced no-where else in the country. Pokhara is the nearest Nepal has to a resort and is popular with Nepalese and Indians as well as Western backpackers. The bus park is in the modern part of town, rather unpleasant, but a 2km taxi ride soon had us in Lakeside, the tourist area by Phewa Tal lake. Resembling a village Thamel, it was strung out along one street, lined with bamboo restaurants, shack stalls and breeze-block lodges. Most buildings were low-rise and set back from the road, which along with the presence of the lake gave the place an almost rural feel. It was a little self-consciously hip, and there was little to see or do besides eating, drinking and boating on the lake, but it was, nevertheless, extremely relaxing.

Dinesh's choice of accommodation again seemed a little down-market, and indeed the beds were hard, but it was clean and the people were friendly enough. At my request he made enquiries about flights back to Kathmandu, as I had absolutely no desire to repeat today's experience. A single would cost me \$66, which I could just about afford, and Rs800 (\$18) for Dinesh. In the evening we ate (somewhat disappointingly), drank and walked. We bumped into Ted, an American traveller we'd met elsewhere several times before. Tomorrow he was going south to India, while we would be turning north-west for the mountains.

Day 170: Tuesday 21 Jan 92 Chandrakot

Much of today's trekking had the dubious distinction of being unnecessary, for a road had recently been constructed along most of the trail's length. Not all of it, however, was yet open to the public, so this morning's taxi took us only as far as Suikhet. We sped up the wide valley floor of the Yandi Khola, stony and grey, more reminiscent of the dry landscape of Baltistan than the monsoonal Nepalese Himalaya. The view from Pokhara is reputedly fine, with Annapurna and Manaslu Himals and the shapely form of Machhapuchhre all clearly visible – when it's clear. Today's low (i.e. below 6000m) cloud obscured them all. Suikhet was a small collection of farm buildings and houses off the new road. As the current trailhead it was experiencing a small boom, and a few makeshift cafés had been hastily constructed to cash in. When the next section of road opened it would no doubt return to its previous sleepy, anonymous existence. We stopped for a quick cup of tea and were entertained by a strolling busker. He regaled us with a fine repertoire of what I assumed were traditional Nepalese tunes, played on a *sarangi*, a simple kind of bowed instrument. He was quite good and I gave a few rupees; I could have sat and listened all morning, and perhaps even got him to teach me a tune or two. I was surprised I hadn't heard any busking in Kathmandu, given the captive audience and the presence of sarangi and flute peddlers.

From Suikhet we set off up the valley side, climbing steadily past rice paddies and the occasional farmhouse. The lower elevation and heavier rainfall compared to Langtang probably explained the sprouting winter crop. The path was wide and stony and we were passed at regular intervals by pack-horse and mule trains, jingling by with little regard for politeness or etiquette. We hadn't run into them in Langtang because the lower valley trail was too difficult. As we climbed we passed a French woman and her podgy young son, and their guide-porter. The youngster seemed to be needing constant attention and encouragement – rather her than me.

Once on the ridge we turned west, and soon arrived at the prosperous-looking village of Naudanda. Here we rejoined the road for a little while, which had taken a longer, more circuitous route to reach the 1425m summit. As we progressed westwards we passed through an endless succession of villages, each running almost into the next in one long agrarian conurbation. This was the main trail to the Annapurna trekking region and the settlements further west. As such it was heavily trafficked by both locals and trekkers, and the villages along it had the prosperous appearance of having benefited considerably from the passing dollars. What effect the new road would have when it opened was interesting to consider. In other parts of the country the coming of roads had brought wealth and prosperity to some, but lured the young away to the cities and diverted most of the traffic – both local and tourist – away from the trail-side villages, with consequent loss of income. The trail from Trisuli Bazaar to Dhunche was one such example; I had taken the bus despite, by all accounts, it being a fine trek. As I walked this ridge I reflected upon how I may have been amongst the last trekkers to bother.

At Kaare we rejoined the road again and stopped for lunch, before continuing downhill towards the Modi Khola. After a kilometre the road disappeared into piles of earth and road stone, and we took to a hillside track which brought us quickly to the village of Lumle. This was almost alpine in character, its slate-roofed stone buildings crowding along narrow,

paved streets and alleyways, clinging to the steep hillside. Our destination today, Chandrakot, was another kilometre or so further on, built in a similar fashion and perched abruptly 500m above the khola. We stayed at the same lodge as the French woman. She ran a craft shop in the south of France and was taking a break from her buying trip to Kathmandu; nine-year-old Leo still seemed a most reluctant trekker.

Today it had been hazy with sunny intervals, restricting the views to the immediate hillsides; this evening the cloud thickened and it rained.

Day 171: Wednesday 22 Jan 92 Hille

The rain had cleared by this morning, leaving conditions brighter than yesterday. After breakfast the French woman set off north towards Annapurna Himal, up the Modi Khola valley side for Ghandrung, while we continued westwards, beginning with a 500m descent to the river. The path was very steep, and fashioned in places into a rough stone staircase. The going was made considerably more hazardous by the endless mule trains; when not scrambling to avoid being trampled by them (the drivers gave no quarter) we were slithering about in the stinking river of mud and manure they turned the path into. We really didn't want to slip in this stuff and had to concentrate hard all the way down. On the other side of the river the small town of Birethanti provided a well-earned tea break.

We left town by way of the German Bakery (sign in English) — this was clearly going to be a rather different trekking experience to Langtang. We progressed up the gentle incline of the Bhurungdi Khola, through bamboo forest and rice paddies, past whitewashed thatched cottages and on to the lodge at Baajgara, which cooked us a mediocre lunch. Just before arriving we passed close to the river. On the far side a flock of a dozen vultures were feasting on a carcass, just out of view behind a pile of stones. I'd never seen such a multitude of large birds before, and in my excitement shot half a role of (400 ASA) film through the telephoto lens. Dinesh waited patiently, and David Attenborough needn't worry himself just yet.

After lunch the trail climbed more steeply, into the upper valley and after an hour or so, to the village of Hille (1495m, about the same as Chandrakot) and tonight's stop. The lodge was a busy, friendly place, right on the trail side with a veranda to sit under and watch the world go by. Besides a depressingly cliquy group of three English lads staying, there was a French Canadian, on whom Dinesh practised his French (better than mine, of course, but then he did have a French girlfriend), another Englishman and an attractive Filipino-Belgian girl, Olivia, who spoke fluent English with a New York accent. In the evening, before it got too cold, we all sat outside and played karim board. I'd seen this being played in the back streets of Kathmandu: it's like a cross between pool and shove ha'penny, played with round, flat counters on a wooden board about 1m × 1½m, sprinkled with flour. It was much harder than it looked and great fun. In all, an enjoyable evening.

Day 172: Thursday 23 Jan 92 Ghorepani

Our early start this morning was not without reason, for the 500m climb to Ulleri was in true Nepalese style — a staircase. At Tirkedungha, half a kilometre beyond Hille, we crossed the Bhurungdi Khola by way of a substantial suspension bridge. The climb began on the other side immediately and we soon settled down into a steady rhythm, stopping only occasionally for water or photographs. We left behind Olivia's party and the French Canadian almost at once; I was beginning to feel quite comfortable on these long slogs. As we approached the end of the climb the summit of Annapurna South (7273m) came into view — an immense slab of white rock with a shallow, lopsided triangular summit. Its towering presence seemed to block off the khola like a huge dam, although in reality it was 12km behind the khola's headwater ridge. We stopped at a porter's rest spot, where a stone ledge had been built by

the trail at just the right height to rest a doko or rucksack on. Across the valley the sun beat down on the green terraces, stacked up like thinly sliced salami. Again I was struck by the sheer scale of this landscape.

Once out of the valley the going was much easier, and we soon reached our lunch stop at Banthanti. As we approached the village I glanced over to my right, to the north; the mist was swirling about the high forest ridges, but clear above them in isolation towered the majestic twin summit of Machhapuchhre (6993m). It was a magnificent sight, a steep symmetric monolith, impressive in the way all Himalayan peaks should be. I shot another half roll of film. Machhapuchhre means “Fish Tail” in Nepali, and from this angle the resemblance was clear. The mountain was sacred to Nepalese, and for this reason no climbing permit was ever issued. Inevitably, it had tempted some; Dinesh told me of one climber who’d got within one last pitch of the summit before being forced to turn back because his Nepalese partner had lost his nerve – the mountain’s gods would not have been pleased.

Olivia caught us up at lunch, and afterwards we walked together through a dark, dank forest; slimy, gnarled trees, dripping moss and creepers above a muddy (shitty) path; it was like something out of Middle Earth and we were quite relieved to escape it. In the spring, though, it would probably have been quite pleasant, and in the hotter months would have provided welcome shade. The exploitation of the forest was now managed by the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP).

The ACAP was established in the mid-1980s by the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation, amongst others, in reaction to the increasingly threatened ecological and cultural integrity of the area – twenty years of mounting overpopulation, deforestation, intensive agriculture, overgrazing, poor sanitation, litter, water pollution and cultural decay were auguring for a crisis. If you hear of the “Kleenex Trail”, then this is it. The ACAP has a headquarters at Ghandruk village, in the Annapurna Sanctuary (a geographic, rather than ecological term). Its activities span community development, forest conservation, conservation education and research and training and are sustained by entry fees and support from numerous (inter-) national organisations.

Ghorapani seemed a bleak place, there being no real centre to the village, just buildings scattered amongst the mud and snow. Although not particularly high (2775m) it was cold and shrouded in mist; perhaps being just ten minutes below the pass at Deorali left it more exposed than it appeared. Our lodge, however, was good, with individual rooms and a warm stove, around which we sat chatting and drinking until quite late. Olivia, I learnt, was a dancer, currently based in New York, hence the accent. Half way through the evening two Korean guys arrived. I thought them a bit strange, and they had trouble recounting their story, but it seemed that today they’d made the equivalent of about 2½ days’ trek – “loonies” I wrote in my journal.

Day 173: Friday 24 Jan 92 Ulleri

Since buying my watch in Sana’a I don’t think I’d ever seen the alarm display a time as early as 4.50 a.m.; it went off as normal, all the same. Dinesh was dressed in an instant and went outside to check on the weather. A promising sky he reported, and by 5.15 our little party was on its way, without even having taken time for a coffee. Climbing Poon Hill to see the sunrise over Annapurna Himal was, according to the guidebook, “probably the single most done thing in the trekking universe”, but this popularity was simply an indication of its excellence. We climbed slowly, as Olivier’s guide hadn’t fully recovered from an infection he’d picked up from contaminated drinking water in Langtang (where, I was appalled to learn, his Italian party had abandoned him). The moon came out and the walk through the broken woodland was surprisingly pleasant, despite the intense cold – I was wearing just

about everything I carried, down jacket and all. Nepal is one of the safest countries in the world for foreigners, so the lone trekker who got mugged on this climb once was extremely unlucky.

The eastern sky was just beginning to redden as we approached the 3193m summit. A couple of other trekkers had beaten us to the top, and as the dawn broke we were joined by half a dozen or so more. The air was bitterly cold and the ground a few centimetres deep in frozen snow, but we endured it stoically for a for two hours, such was the spectacle. The first recognisable form to break from the darkness was the silhouette of Machhapuchhre, a familiar-shaped void in the star-studded maroon sky. Soon afterwards the first rays of the sun caught the imposing expanse of Annapurna South, right before us, and its little brother Hiunchuli (6441m), to the east. As the sun rose higher the more westerly peaks emerged from shadow, until the whole magnificent panorama was spread out around us. To our west, though, the deep valley of the Kali Gandaki remained dark, and beneath us a few lone grey clouds scudded along its course. The snow line was ruled about two-thirds of the way up the valley side, at the same height as the Poon Hill summit. Towering above the valley and dominating the scene completely was the mighty south face of Dhaulagiri I (8167m), the first 8000m peak I'd seen in its entirety and by far the biggest mountain I'd ever set eyes on. It wasn't merely high (only 681m below Everest), but massive and forbidding, standing proud and alone amongst far lesser peaks. It was one continuous plunge from its summit all the way to the river below – a drop of over 5km, making the Kali Gandaki the deepest gorge on Earth. To the north of Dhaulagiri we could see Tukche Peak (6920m), a fine mountain overshadowed by its lofty neighbour; beyond it crouched Dhampus Peak (5951m). Back on our side of the Kali Gandaki and swinging round to the north, the view took in Nilgiri South (6840m) and Annapurna I (8091m), before Annapurna South, Machhapuchhre and Hiunchuli.

Faced with one of the most spectacular view of my life I did what came naturally – I took pictures, rolls and rolls of them. This was not completely straightforward, however, as the intense cold froze my fingers, played havoc with the camera's electronics and, judging from some of the results, scrambled my brain. Furthermore, because of the low light levels and my shaking due to the cold, I had great difficulty holding the damn thing steady enough. There were some derelict stone walls on the summit on which I balanced the camera, but I really could have done with a tripod. Finally, either the processing lab back home or some grit in my camera at the time managed to scratch about half the shots – I was devastated. Having taken so many pictures, though, some were bound to come out, and indeed they did, but I learnt a good few photography lessons the hard way that morning.

Back at the lodge the stove was blazing away and we enjoyed an unhurried, well-earned breakfast. Olivier and party were continuing west today, for the Kali Gandaki and then north, eventually to Jomsom. So we said our goodbyes and parted, Dinesh and me turning back the way we'd come. Our original intention had been to set course due east for Ghandruk but reports of snow (and forecasts of more) and muddy conditions on the long, high trail, combined with our late mid-morning start had persuaded us otherwise; and anyway, I felt I'd got what I'd come for and was content with an easy retreat.

That said, the trail back down today was far muddier than yesterday, and cloudy too, so when we reached Banthanti for lunch there was no farewell sighting of Machhapuchhre to greet us. We didn't walk far afterwards, stopping short of the long descent to Tirkedungha to stay the night at Ulleri, in the *Komal Lodge*. A party of three Canadians and an American were also in residence. The Canadians suffered from that most socially debilitating of afflictions, verbal diarrhoea. After this morning's early start I really needed an early night, but it was not to be; 9.30 p.m. was way passed my bed time.

Day 174: Saturday 25 Jan 92 Chandrakot

I awoke early (for some reason) this morning, to crystal-clear mountain air and through the bedroom window, no less, a superb view of Annapurna South. I went outside and had a look around the village, waved to the children and took some slightly abstruse photos of shallow-pitched slate roofs. Later on we sat out on the east-facing terrace, ate breakfast and soaked up the morning sunshine. That wasn't the only soaking that got done, unfortunately, for I also managed to tip a mug full of scalding coffee into my lap. Screaming a choice selection of Anglo-Saxon expletives I leapt from my chair and frantically removed my pants, much to the amusement of everyone around. I wasn't hurt, but the only change of trousers I had were the thick winter-weights I'd bought in Kathmandu; today, inevitably, was the hottest day of the trek.

The descent to Tirkedungha provided a continuously changing panorama of terraced hillsides and villages, and the time to indulge in some unhurried photography. After a tea stop at Hille we enjoyed a leisurely stroll down the valley, but my pleasure was tempered by a small but incessant and growing pain in my right foot. Eventually I stopped to examine it, and found the skin between my toes flaking and split — it was athlete's foot. There was little I could do about it, so I just took a pain killer and carried on. We had lunch sitting outside at Birethanti. A few tables away a large, brightly dressed (shopped in Thamel Bazaar) English woman was the subject of some consternation amongst the Nepalese. It seemed that she'd managed to struggle this far from Pokhara but had then sat down and simply refused to go any further; her poor guide was at a loss over what to do! I congratulated Dinesh on his good fortune in having a client like myself, persevering under the terrible hardship of over-warm trousers and a sore foot. His reply was in Nepali and surprisingly enough, not to be found in my phrasebook.

The climb to Chandrakot was as muddy as ever and didn't seem particularly strenuous, but we sweated like never before. We'd downed a round of Cokes (something Dinesh, a man of habit, hardly ever forsook his tea for) before we'd even reached the lodge. The proprietress heated a bowl of water for me and I took a very much needed strip wash in the shed at the bottom of the "garden" (camping space), while staring up at the feet of passing locals and the face of the occasional curious cow.

Tonight would be my last night spent on trek, so a late one seemed appropriate. Also staying tonight were John and Jerry. John was about 50 and had just been made redundant by British Aerospace, from being some kind of foreman, I guessed. Presumably he'd decided to invest some of his redundancy money in a holiday; he didn't really seem like the trekking-travelling sort. Jerry was an Irishman, from Belfast but now living in London. He was in his late thirties, and worked as a camera man making music videos and commercials. After a civilised dinner we opened a bottle of beer and the conversation began to flow; even the Nepalese joined in, with the help of Dinesh. Seven (600ml, just over a pint) bottles between us lubricated a sterling rendition of *The Mountains of Mourne* by Jerry, a few Nepalese tunes from Dinesh and a couple of jigs from myself. Hill people (and trekkers, usually) go to bed early, but we were far from ready to turn in; a bottle of Khukri rum was ordered. The session ended, however, quite abruptly a little while later. It didn't seem particularly strange at the time — I'd been ready for bed anyway — but the next morning Dinesh explained that John had apparently tried to kiss one of the Nepalese girls, and his advance had not been appreciated. The proprietress, not surprisingly, had decided to call time. Everyone was friendly enough the next morning, though; Dinesh, at least, found it quite amusing, and John had a hangover to remind him of his misdemeanour.

Day 175: Sunday 26 Jan 92 bus: Pokhara Ø Kathmandu

This morning was dull and overcast, which probably described how John and Jerry felt. I'd escaped a hangover by avoiding the rum; the locally brewed San Miguel was remarkably free from aftereffects. My own discomfort was in my foot, but a couple of Cocodamol tablets eased that to the back of my mind. We walked quite quickly, reaching Lumle too early for lunch; it was never too early for tea, though. The bhatti was quite crowded, with a couple of truckloads of policemen en route to an incident out west, in which a policeman had been murdered. Although the new road meant that such forces could now be deployed much more quickly, I wondered if it had in reality also brought a rise in crime, as I'd heard was the case elsewhere. We didn't linger, though, and an hour or two later were sitting in a taxi on our way back to Pokhara.

Over a late lunch of momos we considered our options for the return journey to Kathmandu: besides the appalling prospect of repeating the coach journey and the rather more expensive alternative of flying, Dinesh also raised the possibility of a night coach. Being comatose with sleep while we battled with the roadworks sounded like an attractive proposition, and presumably the road would be less busy by night and the workmen in bed; I decided to give it a go. That left the afternoon to fill, which we did by boating on the lake, drinking tea and browsing the stalls. We rowed out to Phewa Tal island, dodging the antics of the Indian family outings. It seemed strange to see elegant, sari-clad ladies shrieking and splashing water at their companions, and normally demure and reserved girls openly flirting with lads they were sharing boats with. There were few other tourists on the island but the view over the town and mountains was obscured by low cloud, while the shrine itself was recent and not much to look at. A few scrawny pigeons mooched about in front of it; Saturday, apparently, was the day on which it got used. Back on dry land we strolled by the lake towards the Damside district. It was late in the day, out of season and most of the stalls were deserted. A Tibetan from the nearby refugee camps had laid out a collection of handicrafts on a plastic sheet. I took a quick look and my attention was caught by a three-colour brass bangle; I asked him how much. I knew the asking price for similar items in Thamel was about Rs100; I wonder if he knew? I accepted his Rs65 pitch immediately.

The bus departed at 6.30 p.m. It was, just as I hoped, a much less stressful experience than the journey here, and seemed considerably shorter. We stopped for "lunch" in Mugling at 11 p.m. and ate with the French woman's guide (she had flown back). The dhal bhatt was one of the best, and accompanied by dried chillis. Dinesh and the other guide smiled knowingly as I took a mouthful; bastards — they were blisteringly hot! Somehow I kept a straight face, and at least knew better than to reach for the water jug, but I'm sure they must have noticed my eyes watering. I did, however, decline the vodka the other guide was swigging enthusiastically.

Day 176: Monday 27 Jan 92 Kathmandu

We arrived in central Kathmandu at six o'clock in the morning. The return journey had taken 2½ hours longer than the outward one, but had felt far shorter — something to remember for next time, I think. We started the day with coffee as the first customers at KC's, quiet and relaxed at this hour of the morning. I arranged to meet Dinesh for dinner before moving on to the Guesthouse, where I was given the room at the very top of the building, perched on the roof with a superb view west towards Swayambhu.

I spent the rest of the day mooching around Thamel, buying presents. One of the distinctive traveller fashions of Kathmandu was embroidered tee-shirts, sold by almost every retail outlet in Thamel, irrespective of their normal line of business. The best selection, I discovered, was to be found in a row of open-fronted workshops that lined the street running

south from the Guesthouse. In each unit two or three workers sat at pedal-controlled electric sewing machines, running up designs apparently from memory with remarkable skill and dexterity. Examples of the finished product decorated the walls: Tin Tin in Tibet, the all-seeing eyes of Buddha (adorned with “Om mani padme hum” in Tibetan script) and various dragon motifs all caught my eye. The machinists were quite willing to customise designs for me, add someone’s name or even try something entirely new – if I could draw it, they could sew it. I didn’t need to go that far to resolve a couple of my present-buying dilemmas. The Kashmeri-run glass-fronted shops in Tridevi Marg supplied me with some intricately hand-painted papier-mâché pottery, and to complete the exercise I chose for Carol some trousers from one of the innumerable clothes shops.

In between shopping sorties I did the usual post-trekking thing of hanging out in cafés, drinking tea and chatting. Along the way I met the French woman from Chandrakot, sans Leo – I wonder what she’d done with him – and the American girl from before my Langtang trip. That seemed an age ago, and I’d done so much since, yet she still hadn’t managed to get a trek together. Perhaps that was the unhurried approach an open-ended time scale permitted, or conversely, was it simply an indication of why her trip was taking so long; I never found out.

Day 177: Tuesday 28 Jan 92 Kathmandu

During that first week of confinement to the capital, while waiting for my rucksack to catch up with me, I’d embarked on the most intensive temple-gazing campaign of my travelling career. Pashupatinath, Swayambhu, Baudha, the religious sites of Kathmandu? Done ’em all. Or so I thought; Dinesh enlightened me. There are three cities in the Kathmandu Valley and all I’d seen were a few of the more popular attractions of one of them. Two cities in one day?

“No problem!” – the universal Nepalese response. “What time shall we meet?”

My last day. My last day in Nepal and my last day of my trip. If I’d thought about it before we’d set off I’d have probably anticipated a period of quiet contemplation, taking stock of my experiences, preparing myself for a return to normal life (if I could recall what that was). A leisurely, restful day, up late and early to bed, ready for the long flight ahead. Instead, I was sitting in a rasping auto-rickshaw (as noisy on the inside as out), enveloped in the fumes of the morning rush hour, with only of the knowledge I was paying local’s rate for it as consolation.

Until 1769 Patan was an independent kingdom, distinct and separate from the other two cities of the valley. Now it was part of greater Kathmandu, the Bagmati River forming the only visible boundary. As our little vehicle scooted over the bridge the join appeared seamless, the conurbation unremitting. We progressed along a busy, narrow thoroughfare; everyone seemed to be striding purposefully towards somewhere up ahead. The huddled buildings which lined the street were just as across the river, but perhaps there were fewer tourists about, and cars also. We passed through the Patan Dhoka (gate), beyond which, the guidebook asserted, I would surely get lost. Dinesh had insisted on accompanying me today, and wouldn’t hear of being paid; it was fun to have him along, and although he was no historian he did show me a few things that weren’t in the guidebook, invite me into places I’d have been too reticent to explore on my own and generally ensured that I didn’t get lost or ripped off. I felt quite privileged having my own personal guide, and somewhat aloof from the ordinary travellers and tour groups. The downside, though, was that I rarely got to deal with other Nepalese and didn’t pick up any of the language.

Patan also has a Durbar Square, smaller than Kathmandu’s but architecturally more harmonious, and perhaps a little less frenetic. We emerged on the east side; along the west was another Royal Palace, entirely red brick and carved wood, this one, and so far as I could

tell, built in one single style. The square was filled with the usual collection of shrines and pagodas, the latter adorned with much esoteric wood carving — indecipherable scenes from the *Mahabharata*⁴⁷ and assorted acts of sexual athleticism. The Royal Palace consisted of several adjacent courtyards, most open to the public. We wandered around a few, each quiet and serene. They contained many more fine examples of wood carving, and numerous statues of Hindu deities, most predictably exotic and some downright frightening. The southernmost courtyard contained a large sunken bath, the seventeenth-century Tusha Hiti. A stone staircase led down into a (now empty) pool lined with dozens of Hindu carvings. More statuettes surrounded the tub, while the entrance was guarded by a couple of innocuous lions and a much less trustworthy snake.

We moved on north from the square, along dusty narrow lanes through the old part of town. Suddenly Dinesh turned and ducked through an inconspicuous little doorway. I went to follow but it was dark and crowded inside. All I could see were a group of middle-aged besuited Nepalese men, talking as they left — it didn't seem like the sort of place I should be. Dinesh quickly reappeared, however, and ushered me in, but first warning me to remove anything made of leather. My trainers, although essentially nylon, did incorporate small patches of badly scuffed suede, but you couldn't tell from just a glance. The narrow passageway opened out onto the small, cramped courtyard of the Golden Temple, the Hiranyavarna Mahavihara. On the far side, inaccessible to visitors, was a three-tiered pagoda, clad extensively in brass and decorated with relief images of Buddhas, such metalwork being a speciality of Patan. Railings cordoned off the square itself, which was occupied by an extravagantly decorated shrine. This was guarded at four corners by some of the most ferocious demons I'd seen, although they failed to impress the flock of pigeons that invaded every picture I composed. I wondered if the place was Buddhist or Hindu: the presence of prayer wheels built into the railings and the repoussé Buddhas sprinkled about naturally suggested a Buddhist temple, but the other visitors were all ordinary Nepalese, and therefore presumably Hindus. Dinesh explained it was Buddhist; in Nepal, temples are often shared by the two faiths. The surrounding buildings were the ancient monastery Kwa Bahal, and as we were leaving a monk in robes appeared, entered the courtyard near the doorway and opened up one of the smaller shrines; I peered in from behind. On a table inside were two or three dozen gold butter lamps and behind them a golden Buddha, almost hidden by the pile of katas draped around its neck. The monk lit another lamp and added another kata to the collection. Then he began his chanting, very low, almost under his breath. Perhaps he was aware of me watching? I turned and left him to it, and followed Dinesh outside.

We turned north again for a couple of blocks and arrived at the Kumbeshwar, a venerable old pagoda, dating back to 1392. Outside on a large pedestal a statue of Nandi the bull (looking more like a contented pig) suggested to me the worship of Shiva; Dinesh confirmed — I was learning. The temple was locked, so we just wondered around outside. As we approached a water tank Dinesh reminded me of the story he'd recounted at Gosainkund, of how the lake supposedly drained through an underground channel all the way to Kathmandu. The spout filling the tank in front of us was, apparently, it. I jumped down and put my hand in the stream; it was certainly colder than Kathmandu tap water. Some scientists had recently investigated the theory by putting dye in the lake, but had failed to detect it down here. That didn't disprove the theory, Dinesh was quick to point out. For a Third World farmer's son he had a better feel for scientific principle than some of my supposedly well-educated friends in Britain.

We strolled back to the centre of town and had a cup of tea in a tourist café in the corner of the square. I browsed their selection of tapes for sale, searching for some Nepalese folk music or some Buddhist chanting. Back in Kathmandu we were dropped near the centre of town, in Kantipath. An ostentatiously wealthy Italian family were trying to hire an auto-rickshaw, and the father was making a big fuss over negotiating a fare before getting in; probably just

⁴⁷ The epic Sanskrit poem of India.

heeding his guidebook's advice. Unfortunately he and the rickshaw driver had no language in common, so the Italian had adopted the time-honoured technique of shouting at the foreigner to make him understand. Dinesh went over and had a word with the driver, then turned to the father and to my surprise, spoke to him in Italian. The relief on the man's face was obvious, and he quickly accepted the price. As the whole family squashed themselves onto the tiny bench seat we set off for lunch. I was most impressed and told Dinesh so. "No, don't be", he said, "That was the only number I could remember. It was much more than the proper rate." I thought the driver had looked pleased. "But they are rich and the driver is poor, so why not?" Indeed; if they'd been that worried about a few pounds they'd have walked the half kilometre.

We took lunch at a momo kitchen. An unmarked doorway led into a crowded, windowless room. The diners, all Nepalese, sat on benches along each wall, and in a corner a giant pressure cooker hissed away. We bought tokens from a guy at the door. When the food was ready the huge lid was lifted, and amid clouds of billowing steam several trays of little white delicacies were brought forth. We exchanged our tokens for steaming bowlfuls; with a dash of chilli sauce they were utterly delicious. The place was up an obscure back alley, but on the way out I tried to memorise its location, for future reference. Fifteen months later I returned to Kathmandu and found it again.

At the bottom of Kantipath, below the National Stadium, we joined the queue at a bus stop. As we stood there I noticed some overhead electricity cables and was surprised to learn that we were waiting for a trolleybus. The road east, the Arniko Rajmarg, connected the capital with Bhaktapur and the other towns of the eastern Kathmandu Valley, eventually turning north for the Tibetan border — one day...

A 20 minute ride along the heavily congested highway dropped us at a scruffy modern transport terminus. A short walk north, however, through fields and across the Hanumante River soon had us climbing narrow lanes through a completely intact district of red brick and carved-wood houses. Nothing spectacular, but everything perfectly preserved, without a single concrete building in sight; even the ground we walked upon was paved in a herringbone brick pattern. It had the atmosphere of a large village rather than a city. The cynical might have said Sussex village — everything just a little *too* perfect to be true, but animal dung in the streets and the potters squatting industriously by their wheels would surely have dispelled any such suspicion. The potters wanted money to be photographed, so I didn't bother; they'd have done better trying to sell me their wares.

We didn't spend more than a couple of hours exploring the town, as it was mid-afternoon before we'd started and I was getting a little temple-weary by now. This was a shame, for Bhaktapur more than the other two cities had a special ambience, a quiet grace that could only be appreciated with time. Like the other two cities, Bhaktapur had a Durbar Square, but unlike them it wasn't really the centre of town. The square to the south-east, Taumadhi Tol, was livelier, and contained the most impressive monument: the Nyatapola, a large, five-tiered pagoda built up on a high, five-tiered plinth. The staircase leading up the plinth was lined with pairs of mythical creatures, elephants, lions, griffins and so on, while the eaves, rafters and lintels were all elaborately carved. Brickies and joiners must have made a good living in this town. Durbar Square had its own Royal Palace, and some of the most elaborately carved windows I'd seen anywhere in Nepal. We finished back at Taumadhi Tol with tea at the *Café Nyatapola*, a reproduction pagoda with a great view over its namesake. The sun was getting low in the sky as we departed, and the red-brick buildings were taking on the orange hue of the sky. I'd have liked to have stayed in Bhaktapur.

Having made it back safely, despite being stranded in the middle of the congested highway by a power cut, I took Dinesh out for a farewell dinner. He chose *Narayan's*, in Thamel: a large dining room, popular and well established, although fairly quiet tonight. I ordered an