

## Nepal II: The Nepalling



Planes, planes, planes. Three planes, changing in Mumbai & Kathmandu en route to Pokhara. Ambitious or foolhardy? The timetable included a seven-hour stop in Mumbai, where were some really nice recliners to stretch out on. I looped the strap of my bag round my arm, and found a way to hold my phone near my ear where I should hear its alarm. I was very keen not to wake up too late, but after all this I was now too uncomfortable to sleep anyway. The departure time came and went. This was exactly what had happened last time, so I'd left a gap of a couple of hours at Kathmandu before my flight on to Pokhara. Half an hour passed. Tick tock tick. An hour. I just hoped I'd been pessimistic enough. After an hour and a half we boarded; I was starting to get maybe a little anxious. There are shanties of corrugated iron and blue plastic built right up against the perimeter fence of Mumbai airport. Through the plane window I could see the residents washing clothes, carrying pots of water and generally going about their day while ease & money & a lifestyle they're never going to see, barring a lottery win perhaps, taxis past & stinks up their homes with kerosene. India's IT industry & space programme isn't doing them much good. Why aren't they lined up at the fence pitching stones at the planes?

Anyway comrade, I was heading to Nepal to meet up with Chris, another of Team Nepal from our kayak trip of a year before, who was already in Pokhara with friends Tom & Marcus. They had already spent the last month in Nepal climbing

and trekking. A month! It's all right for some. We were booked onto a ten-day river trip on the river Karnali with a local tour company. That's eight days more than I'd spent on any river before, so I was excited to get going. The Karnali is rated at grade IV+ and big volume with it. I hadn't been too nervous about the river though, not when there were travel arrangements to get nervous about instead: I had to get there first. Yeti Airlines don't have an on-line booking system (who knew?) so I'd arranged the last leg of the journey by e-mail with a guy in Kathmandu called Tilak. Thinking about it, it's pretty amazing that I could do that from my desk in England, but then again 'Tilak' in 'Kathmandu' could just as easily be a scam artist in Lagos. I just had to pony up and hope he was for real - he and the ticket he sent me.

Kathmandu International Airport is pretty basic, but looks like Heathrow T5 next to the domestic terminal: a chaotic, crowded shed reached after a hot, dusty slog up the hill from International Arrivals. The man at the Yeti desk accepted my ticket - yay Tilak. Then it turned out that the same bad weather over Kathmandu that delayed our flight in also messed up the internal flights so that I ended up getting an earlier flight than I'd booked on, climbing over sacks and parcels to get to the tiny plane. So you see, no point worrying about these things. It all works out in the end.

I arrived in Pokhara's tiny airport into clear sunshine and with fine views of the mountains. I didn't have much idea where the guys were staying though - it turned out their phones weren't working. I started to head towards the hotel we'd stayed in last time but within five seconds of the taxi starting I saw Chris cycling past. He actually looked more like Chris's thinner brother - the result of a month in the mountains on Rice Rations. He saw me at the same moment and led the taxi to the Comfort Inn, a hotel in the back streets. I never would have found it any other way.

We caught up with the rest of Team Climbing there, Tom and Marcus - both ex-marines. We went out for beers in the evening, where they spun tales of leeches in the Chitwan National Park.

We had to meet very early at the office of Paddle Nepal, so we set out down the main Lakeside strip before it was even properly light. I'd arrived during the Hindu Diwali festival and this was Cow Day. This meant the cows we saw wandering around town sported garlands of flowers and spots or stripes of coloured paint. The previous day had been Dog Day; Pokhara's dogs still wore their marks of orange

and yellow, though they'd mostly managed to shake off any flowers they'd been wearing. The day before had been Crow Day. Since I'd missed it, I'm just going to assume Crow Day involves catching crows to paint tiny orange spots on their foreheads, & perhaps putting tiny garlands of flowers around their necks. If you happen to know different, kindly keep it to yourself.

The pavements were coloured too, as each shop or house had painted a line of orange powder and a trail of little white footprints leading to their door. There were swirls, spirals and flowers painted as well - and swastikas. A weird sight. Of course they do mean something different here, & it was from places like this the nazis pilfered the design in the first place. Once I started to see them, there were suddenly swastikas everywhere. One Lakeside souvenir shop had knitted hats for sale with a row of embroidered swastikas going around.

Team Paddle Nepal loaded their bus & we climbed aboard. There was a small shrine on the dashboard with incense sticks & an embossed swastika. We spent the whole day on the bus, rattling slowly through the mountains & plains. There were a lot of checkpoints along the road where soldiers or police stopped the traffic. The only difference was the colour of their camouflage. They all carried guns. There were also roadblocks of drumming, dancing children at the edge of every village, demanding a few rupees from every passing vehicle. I suppose this is another Diwali thing, rather than simple banditry.



*Roads? Where we're going, we don't need roads.*

We arrived after dark at a town where we'd stay for the night. All the buildings were strung with flashing fairy-lights. The guesthouse was basic and a bit mosquitoey, but otherwise all right. We ate a big dinner of dal bhat and went to bed early to be ready for an early start tomorrow. But in Nepal Diwali is also celebrated with firecrackers, so I didn't sleep much.

It was still dark when we resumed our drive. After our breakfast stop the roads became more mountainous again. There had apparently been a stronger monsoon than usual, & the mountain roads had taken a real shoeing. Often there were signs of landslides. Towards the end the tarmac gave out entirely, swept away or just buried. The road was narrow, cut into the hillside. There was a rock wall to the right and a very long drop to our left. We raised a thick cloud of dust as our driver & indomitable Tata bus forged through the dried mud, lurching, sometimes sliding or tipping over to one side. At times I could look straight down from the window to see just where the smashed, corpse-filled wreck would finish up if we slid any further left. Happy thoughts. The put-in was at a small town, where the river had retreated from its monsoon high to leave a wide area of sand and shingle. The bus left us; we would meet again week downstream.

So Team Karnali were then half a dozen each of kayakers & rafters, mostly British and American, plus four Nepali guides and safety boaters.

After a quick lunch we got on to paddle downstream a little way, just to get away from the town really. There were a couple of big wave trains but nothing too hard, so it made a good warm-up. It was probably twenty times the size of the last thing I'd paddled. Soon we stopped for the night at a quiet beach populated only by preying mantises. We were sleeping under a tarp strung up between two long wooden oars. Nearby the raft was propped up on its side so several people could sleep underneath.

So, morning on the river. This was what we've come for. While we were eating breakfast a group of brown macaque monkeys came down to the opposite bank. We saw several more groups from time to time during the day, both macaques and the larger grey langurs. England should have monkeys. They're much more fun than squirrels. The section had some big waves and holes but also a lot of flat water. All nice & straightforward so far. It was warm & sunny, a beautiful day on a beautiful river. Through the day we saw occasional people, usually children & in fact often heard rather than seen. We'd just hear some shouts from high up in the trees on the ridgeline. I realise I'm making it sound like Heart of Darkness.



*Another beautiful day in the Corps*

*We stopped for the night at about three o'clock, on a beach with wooded cliffs on both sides & a pit of quicksand at one end. The hilltops were still sunlit but down at the bottom of the valley our beach was already in shadow. There was another rapid a hundred metres downstream, masking a lot of noise. I don't find the sound of rushing water as restful as others apparently do. We had a large very hot fire, & some hot rum punch. Nine o'clock seemed like the earliest we could reasonably go to bed, though by then it had been dark for hours. It's great camping on the river bank but I don't seem to sleep very well. Chris slept out in the open, by the crackling fire & woke with blim-holes in his sleeping bag.*

*The Americans spent some of the evening and following morning fishing, successfully, so breakfast included pieces of fried fish from the river. So to the river, & today Shit Gets Real. It was much bigger & more continuous. There are two lines down Nepalese rapids. There's the Chicken Line, which avoids nasties & is what I would just call the Line. And then there is the Tiger Line, right through the middle. One rapid involved threading a path between two or three monstrous holes - this was the Jailhouse. If you go in, you don't come out again. Dipesh, one of the Nepali kayakers, took the Tiger Line in. Actually he did come out, but after a bit of a beating. The first potential lunch spot was scrubbed because there was a massive hornet nest, full of massive hornets, up above in a tree.*

*On one rapid during the afternoon, the raft flipped. The gear was all secured apart from the rafters and one coke bottle, all of which were scattered across the river. I think the swimmers were quite shocked, & sounded a little confused when asked about it. Raft-leader Santosh denied flipping the raft deliberately. I'm not sure I believe him.*



*Chicken Line all the way*

*Sometimes thumb-sized red and black hornets would come and buzz around us as we sat by the fire. Perhaps our smoke was blowing over their nest. Some apparent hornet expert warned that they have an alarm-scent: that if we squished one of these scouts then its mates would know it and we'd soon be swarmed by hundreds of sting-happy bastards of the night. It turns out though that a marauding hornet can be safely buried in sand without bringing down the wrath of the hive, if it will only sit still long enough.*

*Within five minutes of setting off next day, we reached the "God House", another line to be drawn between massive holes. The Nepalis had been dropping hints about this one for a couple of days, as the biggest rapid we'd come across on this river. Maybe I wasn't ready for it so early in the day but I made a complete pig's ear of it, sideways, backwards - hopeless. At least I kept the right way up and out of the cavernous stoppers. The other really big one was "Juicer". I actually ran this one pretty well but we still had some drama as American kayaker Mitch swam & lost his paddle. I went after them but as I approached they spiralled down into a boil. They popped up again behind me but then reached the cliff & disappeared, perhaps into an undercut. They're probably still down there. That was the last we saw of them anyway. There were spares but I think Mitch was still rattled & he soon*

swam again. No yard sale of lost kit this time but he'd had enough & rode the raft for the rest of the day.

There followed lots of good big rapids but nothing really hard. The raft managed to find one hole big enough to throw it onto one side & eject half its occupants.

We stopped for the night at a more remote beach than yesterday's, where the valley sides were steeper. Among the driftwood at the monsoon high water mark were thirteen mismatched sandals. A little way up the rocky bank, a small tributary stream dropped down from the cliff above in a series of waterfalls. I tried standing underneath, in the shallow plunge-pool. It was great and the closest I'd had to a shower since Pokhara, & by now very much necessary!

We sat out round the fire until late by campsite standards - about half past ten. We seemed to have drunk most of the rum already, without even trying. It's gone into tea, hot chocolate and even orange squash.

Chris picked his cag up off the rocks where it had been spread out to dry. He put it on, and then felt a movement from it. After some flailing around, he dislodged the scorpion from his neck. Check your gear before putting it on! Some people's purpose in life is to act as a warning to others.

The river was pretty easy from here on down. There were a few modest rapids & then the World's biggest boil where the Karnali meets another river of similar size - head-on. Just before lunch Santosh & Mahadev stopped at a village to negotiate the purchase of a pig. When they rejoined us after lunch, Santosh had a whole dead pig draped across the front of his kayak. They had intended to bring the pig back alive but it had refused to be loaded onto a kayak and so Santosh had killed it himself. With a hammer.

This far down the river all the hard stuff should have been behind us so people started switching between raft & kayak. For the afternoon session Julien, a very young American who'd been rafting till now, joined Team Kayak. The river had other ideas though and we found ourselves in a huge wave train. Julien & Mitch swam and some people were thrown from the raft. It came as a surprise to everyone: this was Paddle Nepal's first Karnali trip of the season and the rapid hadn't been there last time. To our left was the muddy scar left by the landslide that had created it during the monsoon.

Pretty soon we pulled up for the night and set up camp. Santosh & Mahadev set about butchering the pig with practised ease. I think they'd done this before. They steamed, scraped & finally singed the hair off, then moved the carcass onto the raft

so the river could carry away the gore. Of which there was a lot. The head & legs were detached with cleavers. A red stain spread up the eddy. I've eaten pork a zillion times but never watched the process of extracting it. The guts and inedible organs went into a bucket. Were Santosh & Mahadev hired as safety kayakers-cum-butchers, or does any Nepali know how to do this? The Nepalis probably think we're weird, being so insulated from this stuff.

Dinner included big pieces of barbecued pork.



*Oh yes, there will be blood*

We had a slow start to the next day. Breakfast included big pieces of barbecued pork. Santosh built another fire and smoked what was left of the pig, which was lots. I wandered down to a dry river channel left by the monsoon, to take a few pictures. Somehow this turned into "hiking up it for forty minutes" when Tom joined me, then strode off up the field of boulders like the relentless hillwalking machine that he is. The channel was about twenty metres wide, a mess of rocks, dried mud and tree trunks, and steep with it. The rush of water that could have carved it almost unimaginable, now dried to a few puddles for frogs and dragonflies.

The paddle was easy today, though there was a big wave-train to start. I saw two men ferrying three women across in a dugout canoe, paddling in among our group. Rather them than me. The long wooden canoes look very heavy & easy to tip; they're very narrow and without airbags I don't know how you could go about recovering one if you did capsize it. Of course they don't have any buoyancy aids either.

The river had flattened & the valley opened out. There were more people about than before, on the broad shingle shore. Behind them haystacks & thatched wooden buildings stood among the fields & trees. The river was mostly flat with a few wave-trains of maybe grade II. There were far more dugout canoes out & about on the calmer water, sometimes as many as ten at a time with people fishing, ferrying or poling upstream. As we passed one village, we could hear the slow putter of a diesel, perhaps from a water pump. It was the first motor I'd heard since the bus left us. How long had it been – about a week? I've lost count.

We pitched up for the night on a stretch of rocky sand - or sandy rocks - after paddling for about six hours, finishing around four o'clock. This had been an island last season & we were hoping we'd be able to camp in peace, but the monsoon had shifted some rocks & it could be reached from the bank. A group of local kids came to see what we were about. We could see them approaching from a couple of hundred metres away, then they stood in neat rows watching us do campsite stuff. We couldn't have a fire, as there wasn't any wood, so instead there were candles strategically planted. We were now in a well enough populated area that we could send out for nasty whisky, then played some rounds of cards by candle & torchlight.

The group of kids returned the following morning. They watched us eating breakfast, then fought over the leftover pancakes Santosh gave them. They didn't seem to be starving or anything, but perhaps just sick of rice all the time. And they were good pancakes.

There were actually a few fun rapids soon after the start but soon the river flattened out. About a kilometre on from having kids competing for a nearly-empty jar of peanut butter, the next group we came across started taking pictures of us on their mobile phones!

The flat water flowed slowly down a canyon cut through layers of rock strata tilted through about forty degrees. Layer followed layer, of ancient lava flow or seabed or whatever it had been before India crashed into Asia & crumpled the rock like the bonnet of a wrecked car. Whatever the layers represented there must have been a couple of vertical kilometres of them. The amount of time for all that to form is just boggling. The trees & houses perched among them are just a brief fluff. Blink & you'll miss us. Blink again, who knows? (My guess: superintelligent lizard-people.)

We had a following wind down the canyon & the raft found they could make a sail out of a bag held up between two paddles, & got themselves a free ride. We got off at one end of a long suspension bridge where there was a small dusty town. It was kind of a hole, to be honest. Pigs & goats foraged among the pebbles & shreds of plastic. The bus was waiting, & we disassembled the rafts ready to be loaded. So that was the Karnali. I recommend it.

A lunch of dahl baat & we were on our way. The first part of the journey passed through the Bardia National Park. No tigers in evidence but we did see some crocodiles lazing about just below a dam. Further on was a large camp fenced in with barbed wire, there were people walking around carrying rifles and it looked like an army base. A sign at the entrance read "ANY TASK / ANYWHERE / ANY TIME / ARMED POLICE FORCE", the letters in the same blue camouflage of their uniforms. I don't know what their camouflage is supposed to hide them from. And why is their motto in English?

We drove through the afternoon & on into the night, with a few stops for food & drink. The bus was actually pretty comfortable, with well-spaced & cushioned seats, but the road was so rough that it was shaking & bouncing like the space shuttle on re-entry. Any sleep was unlikely. We arrived in Pokhara at about two in the morning. Santosh didn't have office keys so instead he took us to PN's storeroom-house where there were rooms we could doss down in till a more reasonable hour. Our room was a concrete box, made liveable by the magic of Thermarest.



*Being eaten by a crocodile is just like going to sleep – in a giant blender*

We spent the day loafing in Pokhara. The guys wanted to spend the afternoon on the internet, I went for a walk along the lake front. There were lots of small

bright wooden boats for tourists to visit the nearby island or just tour the lake. Down by the shore, several of them had sunk. There was a motto painted inside the rim of one sunken rowboat, still visible through the water weeds. "God save me from my friends - I'll save me from my enemies". Let me know how that works out.

On the way back into town to meet the others at the pub, I ran into Claire - a former Sussex paddler who joined the club at the same time I did. She was out in Nepal with some friends paddling other rivers in the area, but I was too surprised to see her there to really say anything sensible.

It's pretty amazing the way a familiar face just jumped out of a crowded street corner in a town halfway around the world. This is the stuff your brain is doing all the time.

Kayaker meets other kayaker in famous kayaking destination - maybe it's really not so unlikely, but it seems very weird when it happens.

We passed most of the next day on the bus to Kathmandu. The roads were horrible but we made good time. Marcus had checked us into the Hotel Silver Home online, somehow. Ed, one of the Karnali rafters, had taken the same bus and then followed our taxi on his bike. Predictably the taxi driver didn't know the way & took us to the wrong place, then drove around the alleyways randomly asking for directions. The top floor dorm-room sleeps five but there were a couple of bags in there already. A sign that perhaps this hotel had some organisation issues? More of this later.

We set out across town to find the Post Office, so the guys could inquire about shipping some climbing gear home. The Kathmandu Post Office was a sprawling complex where signs pointed in all directions and a chart of the sections & departments spoke of a Byzantine complexity. The Post Office was mostly closed & looked semi-derelict. In a huge and empty hall, the front desk directed us to "Parcels (Room 23)" but it couldn't decide if it was open. There was a man there though who directed us from there further around, but that turned out to be the main desk where we'd started. The whole shebang would be closed the next day for a public holiday. The guys decided to send their gear by TNT instead.

Back at the hotel, the manager wanted to know if we'd taken the key out with us. We had. Since we'd been out, he'd needed to open the room for some reason and, not having a duplicate key, had instead kicked the door in. As he explained all this, all the lights went out. Kathmandu has regular power cuts for a couple of

hours every day, but apparently this is still an improvement on previous years where the electricity might be off for eighteen hours a day.

We found a hippie restaurant for dinner. The sort of place where you take off your shoes to sit on cushions at low tables. There Ed met Sam, an English girl he'd met on an earlier trek in Tibet. Everyone seemed to be out travelling for months at a time; they'd come from Tibet, they were going on to Thailand or India. I'd be back at work in a week. On to the Reggae Bar, where there was a band playing mostly Nirvana covers. We returned late to the hotel, & opened our room to find it full of Swedes. Down in the lobby, Tom demanded answers from the night porter, who really only wanted to sit on Facebook until almost dragged to his feet as Chris switched off the computer. He barely spoke any English but Tom managed to persuade him to phone the manager by banging the desk & shouting. Even we could see from the hotel guest book that they'd booked two more groups - another six people - into our room while we'd been out. We should have kept the key! We took the only empty room they had left; Tom & I slept on the floor.

In Kathmandu, the chant of Tibetan monks droned out of every shop's sound system. At the crack of half-past eleven we took a taxi out to the Bouda Stupa, probably the most iconic site in the city. It's on the cover of every guidebook. The huge white dome is topped off with a four-sided gold spire. The eyes of the Buddha stare down from each side, and the whole is strung with bright prayer-flags. Against the blue sky it is absurdly photogenic. You'd have to be a hopeless dickhead to take a bad picture, though I tried. It sits in a brick-cobbled courtyard of souvenir shops and cafes with names like Stupa View. After lunch we took a walk out to visit a nearby monastery. We were only a few streets from the Stupa but still no other tourists had made it this far. It's a constant battle to stay ahead of the buggers. Up a set of steps, a lavishly-painted entrance led onto a courtyard where the temple itself stood. There was a neat row of sandals on the ground in front, and the sounds of drumming and chanting drifted out through the doorway. We went inside, & one of the monks directed us into a corner where there were some cushions. The walls, columns and ceiling were covered in decorative painting, probably highly meaningful & symbolic but all over my head of course (especially the ceiling, aha). About fifty mostly young monks sat in two double rows across an aisle. At the back, behind something that might have been an altar, three big golden Buddha figures gazed down with their sleepy eyes. They were behind a perspex screen, perhaps to keep the temple sparrows from pooing on them. The carved window coverings had holes large enough for the birds to fly in & out. The monks seemed mostly very young, & a senior monk patrolled the ranks, sometimes nudging

a junior to sit up straighter. Two monks manning a drum were mostly hidden from The Man behind its round body as it hung on a frame in front of them; they were giggling & nudging each other like naughty schoolboys. At one point during a burst of heavy drumming, their cloth-wrapped drumsticks came unravelled & they were frantically trying to reassemble them before their next cue.

The service or ritual carried on with bursts of drumming, chanting, bells and deep horns. It was still going when we left, and who knows how long it had been going before we arrived? Restless Tom had stuck it out for about ten minutes, Chris for a little longer. Marcus & I were there for maybe half an hour. It was really nice but by then I was starting to wish I'd gone to the toilet first. Earthly matters intrude. I sometimes have to deliberately remember that these things are not a show put on for my benefit. These guys do this every day, including right now, today; it was going on before I ever thought of going to Nepal. It's hardly an amazing revelation but there you go.

We had decided that for the rest of our time in Nepal we would hire some motorbikes & take a ride in the direction of the Tibet border. Chris & I had never ridden one before though so we were looking for something simpler like a scooter, automatic with one twist-throttle and brakes like a bicycle. The man at the hire shop seemed like he would have been happy to let us take serious bikes though, even when we explained that we'd never ridden a bike with gears before. We didn't mention, and he didn't ask, that we'd never ridden a bike with an engine before. It was tempting to take one of these and try to somehow wing it but decided in the end that we'd better be sensible about it. Sensible being a relative term. The Kathmandu traffic would be enough of a challenge. Tom & Marcus took big boys' motorbikes while Chris & I were content with scooters. Straight into the cramped, crowded alleys of Thamel, this was a hell of an introduction.

We headed out roughly east along a busy, dusty and smoky road. The scooter was at least easy to manage, & we managed to keep together as we headed out past the airport. Ducking around the buses as they stopped to pick up passengers, I started using the horn every now & then as well. It seemed important to show willing. We left heavy traffic behind as our road headed up into the hills & I could start to enjoy the ride. We wound through the rice farms & villages, & it was quite refreshing not to be attracting a lot of attention. Either we weren't such obvious foreigners behind the helmets & face-masks, or maybe they were wise to us and just used to tourists. We were heading towards Nararkot, which is actually quite a touristy place as it sits on the last ridge of the Kathmandu valley. On a clear day

the alleged mountain views are spectacular, supposedly, & you can apparently even see Everest from the lookout tower. So says the guidebook anyway; this was not a clear day. It was vaguely sunny, but so hazy I could hardly see the mountain I was standing on. We found a nice enough hotel, & cheap too as it was now late in the season. I didn't see any other guests.

Marcus was ready to chill in the hotel room, but Tom, Chris & I got back on the bikes. Tom had offered to teach the newbies how to ride a Real Bike, so Chris took Marcus'. It was a slow start as Chris struggled to juggle the throttle & clutch, trying to keep the engine running & to not shoot off the road. We had made a good decision, by not renting these things for ourselves & trying to learn on the job through Kathmandu. Pretty soon we were off down the dirt tracks, once Chris got the hang of the bike I was left at the back. Then it was my turn. At the start I kept trying to brake with the left lever; that doesn't work anymore because it's the clutch. Then I would change gear without releasing the right twist-throttle, and wonder why the engine was suddenly racing. The motorbike weighed twice as much as the scooter. But it was great & after a few minutes I got to the point where I could keep the engine running & even get out of first gear. Not bad I think, for such steep dirt conditions! Too soon we were back at the hotel. Chris was scathing about the scooter after switching back to it. Marcus too, having taken Chris' to look at the town while we'd been out. "A real gutless wonder", was his verdict!



*Nepal welcomes careful drivers*

We woke next morning to a nice bright sunrise, but it quickly lifted mist from the valley to cover up any view of mountains that there might have been. We set off

in what seemed like vaguely the right direction, past the pops of rifle fire from an army rangers base & up to a hilltop lookout tower. Finally we were high enough to see Himalayas, in a line along the north-east horizon. Very impressive they were too. One of them must have been Everest, but the instructions for finding it weren't very helpful. "The second peak to the left of the m-shape." Yes, every two peaks make an m-shape.

The road then ended and became a dirt track through a sandy pine forest. Was this the road we wanted - was it in fact a road at all? Marcus and Tom, on their motorbikes, were having too much fun to care. It got quite steep downhill, & I found I could coast for long stretches with the engine off. I found this because after coasting downhill for a while over the lumps & rocks, I'd generally find when the road flattened that the engine had cut out ages ago. Some kids at a small village we passed were excited to see us & climbed on the backs of the bikes for a ride downhill.

The scooters were hugely unsuitable for the conditions of the so-called road. There was a long section being rebuilt (or just built) where it was just the foundations of loose rocks. It was tricky stuff on a scooter with teeny-tiny wheels. Finally we got down out of the hills & onto a proper road, of course it was still a mass of cracks and potholes.

There were regular police checkpoints, but it seemed that whatever they were looking for wasn't us. We were waved through. The road began to climb alongside the Bhote Koshi river. Past a dam is the upper section and it looks cool. It's very continuous though, for kilometre after kilometre & after a while started to look pretty nasty. We stopped in a small guest house in Tatopani, not far from the border. It was all wood inside & out, a cramped warren of



Everest - or, you know, one of the others

narrow corridors and steep stairs. Our room was on the first floor, as measured from the street, but out back there was a drop of about twenty metres down from a rickety wooden balcony to a schoolyard where an open-air class was being held. Behind was the still-raging Bhote Koshi, and beyond that – Chinese-controlled Tibet. The honking grade V torrent looked like death on a stick and was probably more effective than a barbed wire fence.

We dumped the bags & rode on up to the border. There was a line of trucks parked waiting to be allowed over, but we were able to pass the gates & get onto the so-called Friendship Bridge. Actual friendliness may vary. The river Bhote Koshi marks the border in this area. It looks about grade V below the bridge, but anyway I can imagine that getting permission to paddle this section would be awkward. The border is symbolically represented by a line of red tiles across the middle of the bridge. The Nepali border cops were pleasant but there were also several young Chinese in plain-clothes and carrying walkie-talkies. They said nothing but scowled at us suspiciously, as though the decadent capitalist West might have chosen this bridge & the four of us to launch the liberation of Tibet. One of the Nepalis encouraged Marcus to put a foot over the tiled line; their supervisor stepped in before anyone could start the Third World War. At the far end of the bridge was a large white arch and two uniformed sentries standing motionless. Red stars and gold letters announced "People's Republic of China". Nothing that said "welcome to" and certainly nothing that said "Tibet". There were none of the prayer-flags which were everywhere on the Nepal side of the border (Tatopani was absolutely festooned with them) & the scowling Chinese border patrol looked like they'd been brought straight from Beijing. Everybody - blue-camo'd Nepalese and plain-clothes Chinese - were on the Nepal side of the red tiles.

Morning, and a breakfast of eggs, potato curry & chapatis. The guest house was very cheap, even with a couple of Lhasa beers over dinner, & while the hostess didn't speak much English she & the other staff (the family, probably) were all friendly. Even the border police had been friendly. The Nepalis just can't help themselves. They're even friendlier than Canadians.

Back on the bikes and back to Bhaktapur. The ride was easier than the previous day's, as we kept to proper roads. Even so there were a lot of potholes, as well as sections of rocky dust or mud where a monsoon-landslide had brought down part of a hillside and not yet been cleared. A fast ride though, I lost the others when I got stuck behind a van on a winding hill section of road & didn't see them again for

about an hour, until I found them waiting on a long bridge. Then came a steep winding uphill stretch, where we were much faster than the buses or trucks - if we could only get past. The truckies were actually pretty good about giving us space where they could. In places there'd be a straining truck little more than a moving roadblock, crawling up a steep slope with a huge load of wet sand and leaving a plume of diesel. Time it right and you can carve past without breaking stride. If the truck already had a following of buses then I'd have to get more cunning about nipping up the line.

Bhaktapur is a short ride from Kathmandu. We'd stopped there for lunch on the way out but not seen the main attraction, the old town. You have to pay to get in, ten dollars, a lot in Nepalese terms. But I don't think they charge you if you're Nepalese. The old town is a jumble of narrow brick-paved streets built in a style you can sometimes see hints of in Kathmandu and other places we'd been through, places the modern Asian concrete box hasn't yet reached.



*Tractor tractor!*

In old Bhaktapur the brick houses have carved wooden door frames and window screens, there are patterns moulded into the bricks and there's usually a wood canopy around first-floor level. There are shrines everywhere (though this is true everywhere in Nepal), each one a statue in a brick alcove and with be the remains of coloured dye, incense or rice offerings. The area is dominated by three main squares, with overwhelming numbers of carvings, guardian statues, pagodas, temples, shrines, bells and, where there's room, more carvings. Some temples have a hierarchy of statues lining their steps. The guards of each level are

supposed to be ten times more powerful than those below, so by this reckoning a gryphon is worth ten lions or a hundred elephants. Really? My money is on the hundred elephants.

Of course the place is full of tourists and the t-shirt shops that accompany them (all right - us). Dinner was of mo-mo dumplings, onion bahjees and lashings of chilli sauce from a street corner stall, eaten with a toothpick from bowls pressed out of leaves. We got a few Everest beers and some rum, and tried sitting out in the Tunmadhi Tole square. But a bunch of dogs turned up & started molesting Marcus, so we moved to sit up on the top step of the three hundred year old Nyatapola temple, & watched the activity in the square below.



Nepalica! \m/

In the morning after breakfast we set about exploring the squares before the daytrippers from Kathmandu could clutter the place up. From the metalwork museum we were directed back across the square, by a policeman carrying a huge shotgun, to the woodwork museum where the tickets are sold. The man who met us there was packing heat too. The wood carvings in the museum were pretty good but really no better than those on any building in old Bhaktapur. The most famous example is supposed to be the Peacock Window, which at first we walked right past without noticing: it's just on the side of some guy's house, about ten feet above ground and apparently unremarkable to the locals. I rather like that. Tom & Chris went back to Kathmandu; Marcus & I hung on to look round an art museum, since we'd already paid for the ticket covering them all. It's on Durbar Square, just past the gold arch and the trooper with M-16. We went to the Cafe Nepalica for lunch. They used the right logo & everything, though they spoiled the

effect by playing Elton John as we came in. We ordered lunch & the young waiter then asked if we wanted any "gaza", or "gazza", or something like that. We must have looked blank. You put it in a cigarette, he explained, and it makes you relax. Ah yes. Thanks, but probably not a great idea before tackling Kathmandu traffic. Perhaps something like it was the cause of the traffic jam we hit on the ride back. After some minutes ducking & weaving in & out of stationary vehicles we reached an overturned bus in the road, with a truck trying to recover it. We'd studied a map in advance but in the pandemonium it was hard enough not to get separated. We kept seeing streets that looked promising but still didn't find Thamel, then it started to get dark. We finally abandoned our plan of just guessing the way & asked some police on duty outside the Finnish embassy. We had been heading in exactly the wrong direction. We dropped the bikes off, with no new scratches but with some new dust and quite a lot of new miles on the clock.

For all its horn-tooting anarchy, it still seems that driving in Nepal is still a more friendly activity than in other places. There's a sense that it's a kind of shared endeavour, that everyone is just trying to get along the road & so all are in basically the same situation. The horn is a general "here I am" signal as you approach a blind bend or start to overtake a slow truck. On a UK road the horn basically just means "oi tosser", which seems kind of a shame. At least, it does right up to the point you want to sleep anywhere within two hundred metres of any road in Nepal. Around one in the morning the freestyle horn party loses some of its charm.

This time there were no random Swedes in our hotel room, though they did have to drag another mattress in to make it up to four-bed.

Dinner was at the Everest Steak House, then some last trip beers at the Tom & Jerry's bar. All sorts of expeditions and excursions have used this bar as a base, the walls and ceiling are covered in flags and t-shirts scribbled with signatures and team names. Maybe next time we'll leave one.

Next morning we were going our separate ways. Marcus was staying on in Kathmandu for a few more days, Chris and Tom going on to Bangkok while I flew home.

Obviously, the flight was an hour and a half late leaving.