

“The Fabled City of Kathmandu – August 1991”

In July of 1991, I began my first trip to Kathmandu, Nepal – a place I had only seen on a map of the world. To reach the fabled city, I had to take several flights. The first leg of my trip took me non-stop from Los Angeles to Anchorage, Alaska aboard a new Delta Airlines Lockheed 1011 aircraft. The five hour flight was very smooth, and a delicious lunch of fresh Alaskan cod baked in sherry cream sauce was served as we passed over the Cascade Mountains. The chilled glass of Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc wine from New Zealand was a perfect match for the baked cod. During the short stopover in Anchorage at the new International Terminal, I was able to spend a half hour with my dear friend Nancy – and she looked as beautiful as ever.



All too soon, it was time to bid farewell to Nancy and make my way back to the gate for re-boarding the flight, now bound for Hong Kong. As we departed Anchorage, we flew over Cook Inlet, with stunning views of the mighty Alaska Range, as well as a gorgeous view of Mt McKinley over 100 miles to the north. Rugged snow-covered peaks and huge glaciers dominated the landscape for more than 200 miles as our route followed the long chain of Aleutian Islands. (my thought at that moment was how the remote, rugged landscape below was the very essence of Alaska)



It wasn't long before warm towels arrived, along with a chilled Gin Tonic. As I perused the dinner menu, I was still feeling pretty full after the delicious lunch we had been served on the flight from Los Angeles. So, I decided to order the “lighter fare” – the first course being a fresh garden salad topped with lots of fresh Snow Crabmeat! It was followed by a large plate of assorted fresh Alaskan seafood, including prawns, snow crab claws, and a fantastic salmon terrine – simply superb. The last course was a small plate of fresh fruit, along with a nice selection of cheeses from the Pacific Northwest. A glass of Port completed the “lighter fare” dinner. (I could only imagine what the regular dinner must have been like!)

And just when I thought dinner was over, I was presented with “petit-fours” and a cup of espresso coffee.

By that time, I was ready to catch some sleep as we cruised smoothly over the North Pacific at 37,000 feet. Fortunately, I had already seen the onboard movie, so I wasn't tempted to try and stay awake for the rest of the 10 hour flight. About an hour before landing in Hong Kong, we were served a “light supper snack” of small roasted turkey pita sandwiches, fresh fruit salad, and French pastries, along with hot coffee. (very tasty and just right for arrival in the evening) As we approached Hong Kong airport in the early evening, we had a beautiful view of Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland under huge, white puffy clouds.



Shortly, Kowloon Island came into view as the plane turned to the east, before suddenly banking 180 degrees to land abruptly at Kai Tak Airport – it was one of the scariest places in the world to land a huge jet! On the steep descent toward the runway, we were literally at “eye level” with steep mountains on our left and high rise apartment buildings on our right! And if that wasn't scary enough, the Pacific Ocean loomed ahead of us at the end of the runway!!

Our flight arrived 20 minutes late, so it was a rush to board the United Airlines connecting flight to Singapore. A very helpful Delta Airlines agent escorted me through a “maze” of corridors and gates, only to find out when we arrived at the departure gate there was only one business class seat remaining on the huge 747 – and it was “broken”! But the airline staff were attempting to fix it. At that point, I was told I might have to spend the night in Hong Kong and take the next flight in the morning. (not something I was looking forward to) Finally, after a lot of chatter on the walkie-talkies, several visits to the aircraft, and continued pounding of keys on the computer keyboard, I was handed a boarding pass for seat 4A in First Class! As I settled into my seat, I enjoyed the wonderful first class service by a beautiful Singaporean flight attendant named Tracey. She served us a crisp, fresh green salad that had delicious long stem mushrooms and lobster medallions on top. Then came a fantastic dish of chicken curry – spicy and very tasty. For dessert she brought us an incredible passion fruit mousse cake! (such an enjoyable 4 hour flight)

At last, we arrived at Singapore Changi Airport, a very new, modern facility that was absolutely “spotless”, as was most all of Singapore. Signs around the airport warned of heavy fines for littering and “death” for trafficking drugs! I was through immigration and customs in record time, but when I got to baggage claim, my luggage was nowhere to be found, much as I had expected. While I was waiting, I saw a JAT flight arriving from Belgrade, which I thought was very surprising in view of the tremendous political upheaval in Yugoslavia! After filling out the lost baggage report, I was informed it would be arriving on the next United Airlines flight in the morning. So, my next stop was the taxi stand outside the terminal – very well organized, quick and efficient, as were most things in Singapore. On the way to the Holiday Inn Royal Crowne Plaza hotel downtown on Orchard Road, the taxi drove along a very modern freeway known as the “PIE” (Pan-Island Expressway), passing one high rise apartment building after

another – each one being identical to the next, and all exceptionally clean and tidy! Throughout the journey to the hotel, a bell on the taxi’s dashboard kept ringing every 5 seconds. When I asked the driver, he said it indicated he was exceeding the speed limit of 80 kph, which was of no concern to him! (note: he rarely exceeded 85 kph) The bell rang continuously for the entire 30 minute trip!! Had it continued much longer it would have driven me nuts – yet the taxi driver seemed totally oblivious to it! I was on the verge of demanding he slow down to 80 kph. Finally, having arrived at the Holiday Inn Royal Crowne Plaza Hotel, I discovered a beautiful lobby with lots of rich, dark tropical wood and pure white marble everywhere. And to my pleasant surprise, I was upgraded to a deluxe suite on the Concierge Level. (I got to bed at 1:00am – but having just travelled halfway across the globe, what time was it really?)



I spent the next day working with the Esri-Singapore staff, and afterwards we all had dinner at the Italian restaurant of the Hyatt Hotel next door, where we shared a large “Indian” pizza – a rather strange combination of spiced minced lamb, curry, and pesto sauce, but very tasty! Back at my hotel that evening, I enjoyed a cold pint of local “Tiger Beer” while I wrote notes from the staff meeting. It wasn’t long before I “crashed” as the time zones caught up with me. (how many of them I wasn’t sure) Early the next morning, I took a taxi to the airport for the 8:00am Singapore Airlines flight to Kathmandu, by way of Dhaka, Bangladesh – and the same annoying little bell rang all the way! As I checked in at the “Raffles Class” (business class) counter, I was informed there would be an excess baggage charge for the two large boxes of training materials I needed for the class in Kathmandu. I was expecting the charge, but not the bill for \$606 Singapore Dollars (\$450 USD)!! Upon payment of the charges, I was handed an invitation to the “Silver Kris Lounge” – a gorgeous, peaceful place decorated in lovely shades of grey, blue, purple, and black – very elegant and spotless!



Soon after I finished a small plate of French pastries and fresh fruit, along with a cup of Arabic coffee, I heard the boarding announcement. Once on board the new Airbus 310 aircraft, we were served a chilled glass of fruit juice and a hot towel. Breakfast followed shortly after takeoff – a fabulous omelet filled

with smoked salmon and gruyere cheese. Three hours later we landed in Dhaka, the capitol of Bangladesh. I noticed a majority of passengers departed the flight, but for security reasons the rest of us had to stay aboard the plane as it was serviced. As we waited, I saw a Saudi Airlines 747 landing, presumably to take Muslim pilgrims to Mecca for the “Haj”, since Bangladesh is predominately a Muslim country. Once we departed Dhaka airport, I could see widespread flooding from a recent cyclone, typical of this time of year.



Meanwhile, most passengers sat by the window on the right side of the plane, hoping to get a glimpse of the mighty Himalaya peaks. But sadly, thick clouds obscured the view, also typical of this time of year. An hour and a half later, the plane began its descent through heavy dark clouds into the Kathmandu valley. For several minutes we couldn't see anything but the clouds. Then suddenly, deep green hills appeared below us, and as we slowly continued descending, dozens of bright red brick buildings and green fields of rice terraces came into view. It was a beautiful introduction to Kathmandu and the country of Nepal.



Upon arriving at the new International Terminal, I spotted a man from the United Nations holding a sign with my name on it. He proceeded to speed me through Immigration and Customs inspection, where we retrieved my baggage and the two boxes of training materials, which had arrived earlier aboard an Air India flight. I really appreciated his assistance with immigration and customs procedures, since most of the airport staff had gone on strike the day before. He escorted me to a waiting car that would take me to the “Himalaya Hotel”, and as we rode along the busy, chaotic streets I felt as if we could easily have been in India! The scene was bordering on pure chaos, or so it appeared to me. Traffic was a “colorful” mix of large trucks, dilapidated old buses belching thick clouds of black diesel smoke, bullock carts slowly weaving their way through the heavy traffic, countless bicycles, scooters, and cars – in the midst of this chaos pedestrians darted in and out of it trying desperately cross the road without losing their life! Meanwhile, everything and everybody was “competing” for the middle of the road.(to me it looked like

a massive game of playing “chicken”!) So, I tried to remain calm and resigned myself to trusting my driver, which was a wise thing to do. As we proceeded toward the center of Kathmandu, my overall impression was that most everything was in some state of disrepair or reconstruction. At last, we arrived at the Himalaya Hotel, a beautiful white stone building set back from the busy road and in the middle of gorgeous flower gardens overlooking the Kathmandu Valley and the hills beyond, which remained shrouded in mist.



When I entered my room, I noticed a lovely basket of fruit on the table, compliments of the hotel. There was also a note from Mr. Surrendra Shrestha of the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) welcoming me to Nepal. (later I discovered there were a lot of Shrestha’s in Nepal, a very common family name, much like Smith’s in England) As evening approached, I headed to the hotel bar for a cold pint of the local brew called “Iceberg Beer”. After which, the time zones caught up with me again and I retired for the night. As I fell asleep, I realized I was finally in the fabled city of Kathmandu – one of the few cities in the world with a mysterious and unmistakable romantic sound to their name, among places like Timbuctou, Kota Kinabalu, and Mandalay!

I was up early the next morning, only to find the mountains still shrouded in thick heavy grey clouds, so typical of the monsoon season. But the entire valley was a lush deep green color as far as the eye could see. After a shower, I went down to the “Base Camp” coffee shop for breakfast, before meeting with Mr. Surrendra Shrestha to discuss the agenda for the GIS software training class I would conduct at the International Center for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD). As we drove to the ICIMOD office, Surrendra told me about the recent “political instability” in the country. Apparently, the protesting “Communists” had threatened to set themselves on fire (self-emulation), however, he believed they would actually pay some poor peasants to commit it – how sad! At one point, we saw some people gathering as though preparing for a demonstration, so we quickly avoided the area. Once we arrived at the ICIMOD office, I was introduced to the class by the Director and then we began the GIS training class that would last for the next week. During the lunch break, I joined the class for a meal in the ICIMOD canteen, which included dishes from several countries of the Hindu Kush – Himalaya Mountain Region. At the end of the day, my driver took me back to the hotel, and along the way we saw tires being burned in the middle of the road as part of a protest, while some police in riot gear stood in formation along the edge of the road. Meanwhile, a crowd was milling around, as if waiting for something to happen so, we took a short detour! (Later, as I read the local newspaper, I found out it was a protest by students of the Engineering Institute, which was broken up by the riot police using tear gas! However, there was no mention of the reason for the protest?) Once I returned to the hotel, I was able to relax with a cold glass of Iceberg Beer, and I reflected on my travels around the world, never having been to a country that didn’t brew a local beer – at least not yet! The hotel bar was pretty deserted, since it was the height of the monsoon season and not the most popular time of the year for tourists. Later in the evening, a couple of other people came into the bar, so I was no longer alone.

Then, precisely at 6:30pm, the one and only TV was turned on for the beginning of the broadcast day – being only one channel with just 3 ½ hours of programming per day! It began with an old episode of “Lorne Green’s Animal Kingdom” featuring bears in Alaska. It was followed by an outdated episode of the “Gillette Sports News”, and needless to say, nothing on TV was “current”! So, after the old sports news, I headed upstairs to the Base Camp Restaurant for dinner. I was seated next to a table of young Japanese tourists who were a bit loud but obviously enjoying themselves. It was fascinating to watch them as they tasted food they were clearly not familiar with! Meanwhile, I ordered one of my favorite Indian dishes “Chicken Murg Thikka”, served with steamed rice and “Dal Murtha” (boiled lentil beans) – an excellent meal! The cost was less than \$8.00 – very inexpensive for me but way more than the average Nepalese would earn in a month! (at times like this, I begin to realize how “poor” being poor really is!) It was only 9:30pm when I finished dinner and headed to my room, since it seemed like everything in the city closed down early.

The next morning, I was up early at 5:30am, but unfortunately, the high peaks of the Himalayas were still not visible. When I first arrived in Kathmandu, I was told that if there was a heavy rain during the night, it might be possible for the early morning sky to be clear, but it was not so this morning. As I ordered breakfast in the Base Camp restaurant, the sun suddenly appeared and illuminated the entire Kathmandu Valley. It was a beautiful sight, but the high mountains remained obscured by heavy clouds.



My breakfast was a wild mushroom omelet, fried potatoes with bits of smoked bacon, and toast served with a couple of different jams. One of them was a bright red color and the other a deep orange. They turned out to “somewhat” resemble strawberry jam and orange marmalade! After breakfast, I gave my postcards to the hotel Bell Captain to be posted, and I was kindly informed that my 6 Rupee stamps were not enough postage – I needed additional 2 Rupee stamps for each postcard, which I then purchased from him. He promptly proceeded to paste the stamps on my postcards, mostly over the address! I tried to repair the damage in hopes the postcards would reach their destination! Just then, my ICIMOD driver picked me up for another day of the training class. When I arrived at the ICIMOD office, I was informed they were missing a crucial piece of system software for the Fortran compiler, which prevented us from completing the installation of the Esri GIS programs needed for the training class! So, we began searching for a copy of the system software from all possible sources – including Singapore, Dhaka, New Delhi, and even Redlands, though it was in the middle of the night there. Meanwhile, I joined the staff for lunch of chicken with curried vegetables and rice in the canteen – a bit spicy but very tasty. (and the price was hard to beat – “free”)

At the end of the day, back in the hotel bar I had a cold glass of Iceberg Beer as I watched a group of three men at a table nearby. Overhearing their conversation, I found out one of them, a young man from England, was almost broke after having his one and only credit card declined in Bangkok. Then, the older Swedish man generously offered to loan him some money. Meanwhile, the third man, a mining

engineer from Canada, began telling stories of his travelling adventures. It wasn't long before each of them was trying to outdo one another. (it was fascinating to "overhear" their discussion, knowing they had no idea I was writing about them in my journal!) One of the topics of their discussion was about how to avoid getting sick while travelling in foreign countries, the general consensus being to avoid drinking water! Probably a very wise decision, especially in Nepal. Suddenly the mining engineer said that he suspected the recent local newspaper reports of deaths from "gastro-enteritis" were really cases of Cholera that the government was trying to cover up. There could have been some truth to the suspicion, but we never knew. After the group of three left the bar, the nightly TV programming began with a regular series that seemed to be very popular with the locals and the staff in the bar. As I watched the program, I found it a bit difficult to figure out the story, but it "looked" like a typical "romantic sitcom". And although the production had some "rough edges", it appeared to be very entertaining, with virtually all the hotel staff engrossed in watching it. At the end, there was a message from the sponsor, a local manufacturer of sandals!

The next day began with my regular routine – up at 6:30am to see if the mountains were visible, Breakfast at 7:00am, meeting the ICIMOD driver at 9:00am, lunch in the canteen at 1:00pm, return to the hotel and a cold pint of Iceberg beer at 5:30pm, TV beginning at 6:30pm, and dinner at 7:00pm. Except, one evening I was invited to join the ICIMOD staff for a dinner party at the ICIMOD Guest House that was organized by my host Basanta Shrestha. We arrived at 7:00pm for cocktails and snacks upstairs on the rooftop terrace, where we enjoyed a lovely view of the sunset over the valley below. Among those invited were a number of people working in Nepal from Germany, India, Bangladesh, Burma, Holland, Australia, and the USA. During the evening I was asked to tell some of my travel stories – I chose to tell the "funny" ones, or at least those that are funny now! After drinks and snacks upstairs, we went downstairs for dinner, seated family style around a large table. The ICIMOD cook served up a very fine array of Indian food, all of which was delicious. A huge fresh fruit salad finished the dinner perfectly. As the hour approached 9:30pm, everyone bid their farewells, and I returned to my hotel room, having appreciated being invited to share the experience!

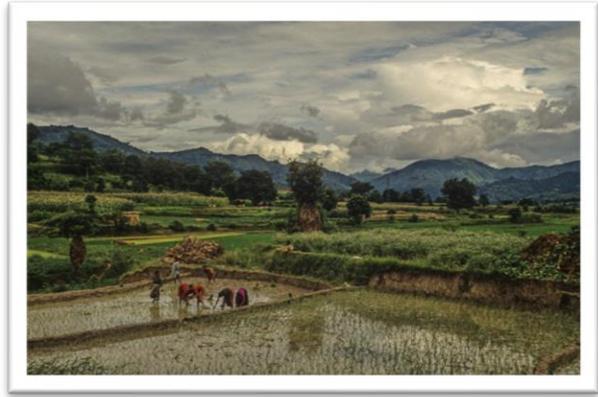
The next day was another routine one, with breakfast at 7:00am, training class from 9:00am until 5:00pm, with a short break for lunch with the class in the canteen, followed by an Iceberg Beer in the hotel bar at the end of the day. Then at 6:30pm sharp, we all watched a chorus of schoolchildren singing some beautiful, traditional Nepalese folk songs on TV. All of a sudden, it hit me that "everyone" in the bar was speaking English, including two people seated at the table next to me – a young guy from France and an older gentleman from China! Precisely at 10:00pm, the TV programming ended, even though it was the weekend. (but I suppose, one evening is the same as any other evening in Kathmandu – no concept of "Happy Hour" either) As the TV programming ended, a Japanese man became upset and walked up to the bar to "complain" there was nothing on TV in English! (how weird is that) However, one of the programs, even though it wasn't in English, was an interesting combination of a "who-dunnit" and "tragic love story". Despite the fact that I couldn't understand a word of the dialogue, it was so "stylized" I found it fairly easy to follow the story – a nice twist in which the girlfriend turned out to be the murderer of her roommate as a consequence of jealousy over the boyfriend.

I was up early the next morning to take a Royal Nepal Airlines flight to Pokhara, a city at the foot of Annapurna, one of the highest peaks in the Himalayas! (I was really looking forward to the trip!) When I arrived at the domestic airlines terminal, I found it to be very shabby, probably since it was the old original terminal building. I checked in for the Pokhara flight and received a boarding pass for seat 8D, which was on the "right" side of the aircraft to see the Himalaya mountains, if they were visible. The departure lounge was nothing but a large bare room with a few wooden benches and a tiny snack bar in one corner. So, I bought a small cup of tea at the snack bar and sat down to wait. After an hour, an announcement was made in both Nepali and English, neither of which I could understand! However, from the conversation and activity among the Indian passengers, I gathered that the departure had been

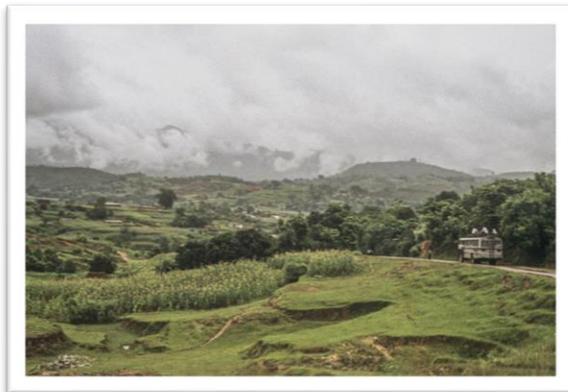
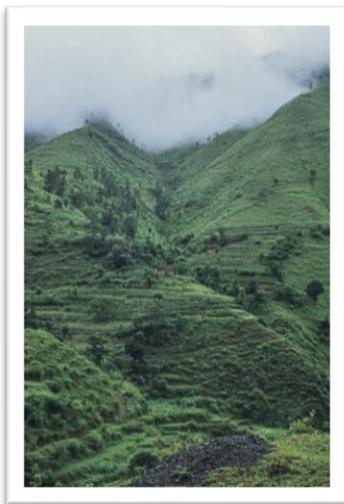
delayed. So, I walked back to the snack bar for another cup of tea. (a very tired looking chicken sandwich was also available for 25 rupees – I passed on it) Eventually, another hour later, as heavy rain poured down outside, the inevitable announcement came that our flight had been cancelled. And although I didn't understand the details of the announcement, it was obvious from the actions of the people around me. Looking outside, it was pretty clear at that point the flight had been cancelled because of the bad weather. As I retrieved my ticket, I asked the Royal Nepal Airlines agent if there was another flight later in the afternoon. Yes, indeed there was a flight scheduled to depart at 4pm, but it was almost certain to be cancelled as well – and besides, it was already fully booked with no seats available! At that point, I walked out of the terminal and responded affirmatively to the first kid who asked if I wanted a taxi!

Once I was back at the hotel, the heavy monsoon rain continued. I went to the “Yeti Travels” desk in the hotel lobby to ask if there were any day trips available the next day? Indeed, they recommended that I take the “jeep” trip up to the village of Kodari on the border with Tibet. It sounded very interesting, so I signed up for the tour. But they were reluctant to accept my credit card, preferring to have cash instead, for obvious reasons of currency exchange on the black market. (the official government rate was \$1 USD to 42 Rupees – who knows what the black-market rate would be, but almost certainly two or three times higher!) After I said “take my credit card or I won't take the tour” I was given a ticket for tomorrow's tour. Having arranged my jeep tour, I headed to the hotel bar, where I was soon joined by a group from Holland who asked me where I lived in Holland! It took me by complete surprise as I had always assumed it was easy for anyone to recognize me as an American as soon as I opened my mouth! After an interesting conversation with the Dutch group, I headed up to the Base Camp restaurant for dinner, where I was the only person, besides a young Japanese couple. I chose another of my favorite Indian dishes for dinner – tandoori chicken, dal ganga jamuni (lentils), and fresh hot naan (baked flatbread) from an old brick oven. (all the meals I had at the hotel were delicious, traditional, and fantastic) Meanwhile, during the dinner hour, a local band “valiantly” did their best to play classic western pop and country music on their guitars, electric organ, and drums. As I listened, it always seemed like they were a little “off key” – more like with traditional Indian music. But they “gave it a good go”, as my dear departed friend Roger Tomlinson would have said!

After breakfast the next morning, I gathered my camera and a few other things for the jeep trip to the tiny village of Kodari on the border with Tibet. At 9am, my driver/guide arrived at the hotel in a small Suzuki 4wd vehicle. The previous day, as I had booked the jeep tour, I had been told there were no “jeeps” available, but there would be a 4wd vehicle for sure. Then came the comment that I should expect a “bumpy ride”, which I believe was a way to prepare me for a much smaller vehicle rather than a larger “jeep”. Anyway, I climbed into the little Suzuki and off we went at breakneck speed, weaving in and out of the heavy city traffic. Once we were beyond the densely populated urban area, large terraced fields of rice appeared, cascading down the slopes of gentle hillsides – beautiful shades of light green, almost “iridescent” under the diffuse grey cloud cover. As we left the city behind, I noticed that most of the buildings among the rice fields were made of bright red brick, in strong contrast to the deep green fields – a beautiful scene! Later, we passed a huge brick factory, built by the Chinese government decades earlier, where massive mountains of red brick were stacked everywhere.



It wasn't long before the road became much narrower and a lot "bumpier", which lead me to wonder whether there were more potholes than road! It was especially so when the little Suzuki continuously bounced up and down as we must have hit more potholes than tarmac! Meanwhile, I tried my best to remain in my seat despite the lack of a seatbelt – and the absence of a side door didn't help matters any! At the same time, we weaved back and forth on the road in a vain attempt to avoid a collision with everything from large buses and trucks to cars, bicycles, pedestrians and even water buffalo! And all this while trying to maneuver around the potholes! (if only I could have recorded the experience on video – scary!) After a couple of hours, the road started to climb out of the Kathmandu Valley up to a very high ridge shrouded in heavy grey mist. As I looked around, it was clear that the slope below the edge of the road dropped off precipitously – really scary! Upon reaching the summit of the ridge, the rough, narrow road descended along a steep, curving route still shrouded in mist. I could feel we were descending however I couldn't tell just how far down we would go, but I could feel it was going to be a long way down. As we continued to descend, we suddenly passed below the heavy clouds and came into a long river valley surrounded on all sides by beautiful rice paddies on steep, terraced slopes, sometimes being only 1 – 2 ft wide – a classic scene. Then all of a sudden, we pulled over to the edge of the road just outside a small village – I was informed this was our first "pit stop". And like everyone else, I took a "pee" by the side of the road. (the experience by the side of the road confirmed my impression of Nepal as having sanitary conditions as atrocious as China – many times I saw young children squatting in the middle of the road to relieve themselves)





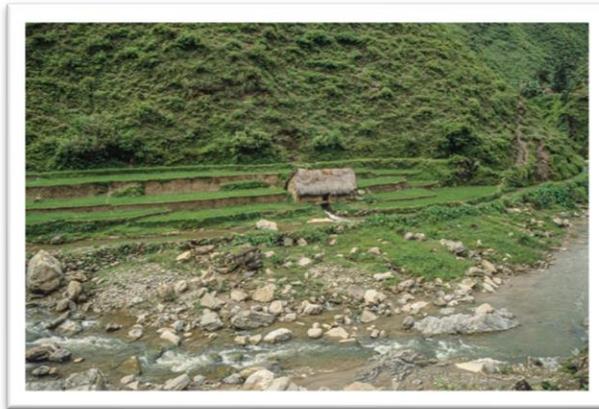
After another two hours of an incredibly jarring and altogether uncomfortable ride in the tiny Suzuki, it wasn't getting any better – nor was it likely to, judging by the road ahead. Further on we crossed a large new bridge built by the Chinese, and then came to several sections where the narrow road became almost impassable due to several recent rockslides that resulted in lots of soft mud on the road. Somehow, we managed to slip and slide our way through the stuff. Now and then, small villages appeared alongside the road, consisting mostly of a single row of mud houses and shops clinging to the steep slope between the road and the river several hundred feet below. Meanwhile, the road continued to be crowded with many old, dilapidated buses and trucks.



Some of the trucks had been retrofitted with windows (no glass) and wooden benches for passengers – a “crude” approximation of a “bus”. Passengers entered through a door at the rear, and in virtually

every case, the truck (aka bus) was filled to capacity or overflowing – even with people “hanging” on to the rear or “clinging” to the top. And, of course, the cab of the truck was also packed with passengers, which I wondered if it was considered to be “first class”? My driver told me these trucks were called “tempos” and were a very inexpensive mode of transportation. (judging by the cramped, primitive conditions, I would certainly hope so – I was even surprised that anyone would actually “pay” to travel that way!)

As we continued north, we came to a junction with a large, fast flowing river called the “Sun Rising River”. I saw a small village on the opposite side of the river, connected to the road by a long, narrow pedestrian suspension bridge that provided the only access to and from the village.

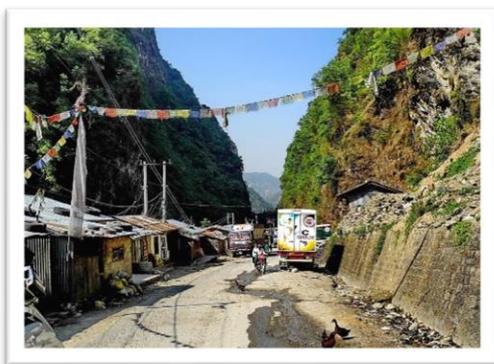


As we continued, I saw many more small villages “clinging” to the steep mountain slopes above the rain swollen river. Occasionally there were tiny red brick huts where water from the river was channeled into them. My driver informed me they were small water-powered stone mills for grinding grain. In some places, serious erosion had resulted in rice terraces on whole mountain slopes tumbling down into the raging waters of the river, swollen by the recent monsoon rains. After crossing the river, the road began to ascend a steep mountain slope and deteriorated at a fast pace – if that was possible! The road rapidly became deeply rutted and covered in soft mud, making it almost impassable. At that point, I began to wonder how the old dilapidated buses and trucks were able to make the journey, especially since their springs were essentially “shot”, so much so that the vehicles often “leaned” seriously to one side – even more so than the “Leaning Tower of Pisa”! When the road wasn’t muddy, it was so deeply rutted that it resembled a “washboard” - a real “bone shaker”, made even worse by the lack of a seat belt! At last, after several hours of negotiating the “road” to Tibet, the rain tapered off to intermittent showers as we approached a huge hydroelectric power plant near a massive “magnesite” mine, something I wasn’t expecting to see in such a remote part of the world. About ten kilometers further,

after passing more tiny villages clinging to the side of the mountain, we came to a halt, along with a large number of other vehicles stopped in the middle of the road. Just beyond was a bulldozer, and it didn't take long to realize a massive landslide had closed the road! As I walked up the road to get a better view, I passed the "Fishtail Tours" bus filled with French tourists. The huge landslide had happened at the narrowest part of the road below incredibly steep rocky cliffs. While I stood there, alongside many of the French tourists, huge rocks continued to fall from the cliffs. On the other side of the landslide I could see a few people trying to cross the unstable mud and rock, while the bulldozer sat idly by. There were even several children climbing on the machine as if it were a giant "toy".



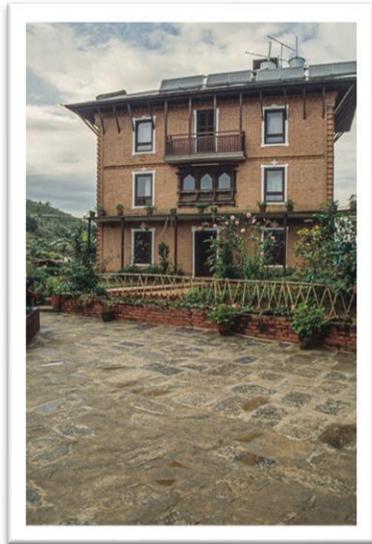
Nothing happened for almost an hour, except for rocks falling straight down into the river 200 feet below the road. Meanwhile, more and more people became impatient and began "scrambling" over the mud and rock to the other side – as if playing a game of chance with the falling rock. At that point, my driver and I decided it was very unlikely the road would be reopened today, or perhaps even for several days! It was a pity since we were only a couple of kilometers from Tibet. *[A couple of photos from online that show the village of Kodari and the border with Tibet]*



But I was very thankful we were on the Nepal side of the border, or we could have been stuck in China with no way to return to Kathmandu! On our way back to Kathmandu, we stopped for lunch and tea at the "Himalaya Horizon Lodge" situated on top of a high ridge, which we had passed much earlier in the morning as it was enveloped in heavy clouds. Now the clouds were gone from the lodge, but they continued to obscure the view of the high peaks of the Himalayas, just 50 kms away. The lodge was beautiful amid the picturesque setting – a place to return to someday. While I hadn't been able to reach

the border with Tibet, the journey had been a most interesting and memorable one, despite being very uncomfortable!

The next morning, my daily routine was broken by the sight of a large elephant plodding slowly down the middle of the busy road in front of the hotel. It seemed totally oblivious to the chaotic traffic surrounding it! Later in the day, Surrendra invited me to join a lady from the “Canadian Development Organization” for lunch at the “Himalaya Horizon Lodge” outside the village of Dhulikhel, about 30 minutes north of Kathmandu – the same place I had been the day before. The day was beautiful and sunny, but still no view of the Himalaya Mountain peaks. So, I had to be content with buying a postcard of the view!



However, lunch was delicious – curried chicken kebab, dal, and spicy mixed vegetables served over rice! Back in the hotel bar that evening, a young Dutch student struck up a conversation with me as soon as he realized I was familiar with computers. At that point he launched into an adamant argument for the “freedom” of computer “hacking”, as if he had the “right” as a hacker to probe into any computer system, even top-secret military systems. Needless to say, we had some serious “diverse” opinions during our philosophical discussion! It was not a “pleasant” conversation for me, and meanwhile, his parents just ignored us.

The next day was much of the same routine, with the exception of lunch in the canteen – spaghetti and meat sauce. (but who knew the origin of the meat!) Later in the afternoon, Mr. Kotta drove me downtown to buy a roundtrip ticket to Dhaka, Bangladesh where I was scheduled to meet with the local Esri Bangladesh office staff to plan for training classes. As I was finalizing the reservation at the Biman Bangladesh Airlines office, I suddenly realized I had forgotten my wallet! Mr. Kotta quickly volunteered to return to the ICIMOD office to fetch it. Meanwhile, my reservation had been confirmed, but I had to wait for Mr. Kotta to return with my wallet. As I waited, I decided to go to the Royal Nepal Airlines office to change my Royal Nepal Airlines flight to Bombay over to Indian Airlines instead, so that I could depart from Kathmandu two days earlier. When I asked the Biman Bangladesh Airlines staff for directions, I was told it was on “New Road” by the “arch” next to the Post Office, which meant nothing to me, being my first time in Kathmandu – but they assured me with the old saying “you can’t miss it”. (dangerous) It was a long walk in the hot, humid afternoon, so typical of the monsoon season, which made it especially uncomfortable along the crowded streets. I literally fought my way through masses of people, animals, and countless sidewalk stalls. It seemed almost the same as driving through Kathmandu traffic. Suddenly, I thought that perhaps these people walk through a crowd like they drive through traffic!

Finally, after dodging people, cars, bicycles, buses, and trucks, I asked a street vendor for directions to the Royal Nepal Airlines office, to which he responded, "It's just up the street, you can't miss it"! (how many times have I heard that) And at last I spotted the office, indeed next to the Post Office. (but I never saw the "arch") The Royal Nepal Airlines agent "reluctantly" endorsed my ticket over to Indian Airlines, so I could depart Friday evening instead of Sunday. But he kept asking me why I didn't want to fly on Royal Nepal Airlines – to which I responded that it wasn't a matter of not wanting to, just their schedule didn't fit my travel requirements. His last question before handing me the ticket was "why can't you leave on Thursday instead"? (it was obvious he didn't want me to fly on Indian Airlines!)

Now with my ticket endorsed, I walked back to the Biman Bangladesh Airlines office. On the way, I passed a large open-air market that looked to be most unsanitary. My impression was confirmed when I saw an old man blow his nose onto the ground just inches from a basket of fresh vegetables! (needless to say, I didn't buy any vegetables) Just beyond the market, I struggled through a large crowd fighting to get on an old dilapidated bus already seriously overcrowded. At last I reached the Biman Bangladesh Airline office and met up with Mr. Kotta who had brought my wallet from the ICIMOD office, enabling me to pay for the ticket to Dhaka. By this time, I was soaked with sweat and looking forward to a cold Iceberg Beer in the hotel bar. At the end of the day I joined Dr. Beckwith, the Canadian mining engineer, for dinner in the Base Camp restaurant. During dinner, he told me his bank had refused to approve his hotel bill of 60,000 rupees (3,000 dollars). Apparently, he had been staying in the hotel for over four months. Then he said, "I'm leaving tomorrow so it's not my problem"!

Lunch in the canteen the next day was a pleasant surprise – delicious roast pork with sweet and sour vegetables. Later, at the end of the class, Surrendra invited a few of us to join him for dinner at a "The Jungle Lodge" north of Kathmandu. Along the way, we passed through a Tibetan refugee camp where some makeshift Buddhist temples had been established, as well as several small shops selling beautiful, traditional Tibetan carpets. When we arrived at the entrance to the grounds of the lodge, we were met by a large 14 year old elephant named "Lakhti" who stood over 10 feet tall. Her driver led us to a deck on the top of a small building where we were able to step onto the riding platform strapped to the back of Lakhti. As we sat in the "saddle", so to speak, the driver seated at the front gently tapped Lakhti behind her ears with his feet and suddenly we were "off and running", in a manner of speaking! In reality, we were "swaying" from side to side and front to back at the same time in slow motion! Along the ride to the lodge, we slowly passed several herds of antelope and deer as they grazed on the lush green grass – actually it was the golf course! As we approached the lodge, Lakhti gently and gracefully stepped over a short fence to deliver us to our destination. On a side note about the golf course, the "rough" was an almost impenetrable jungle, complete with a cacophony of mysterious sounds. However, the putting greens weren't green at all, rather they were black asphalt!

Slowly the huge pachyderm climbed a low hill toward the lodge as a light rain began to fall and the evening darkness gathered around us. At last a beautiful old colonial style building appeared, bathed in the soft glow of oil lanterns lighting our path. As we arrived at the front door of the lodge, Lakhti first knelt down on her front legs, which felt like we were about to be thrown off. Then she knelt down on her hind legs so that we could climb off by stepping into the "crook" of her tail being held by her driver. As custom and tradition dictated, each of us placed a 100 rupee "tip" on the ground and then Lakhti gently picked it up with her trunk and promptly handed it to her driver! (all in all, the ride to the lodge was a magical experience I shall not forget) We headed into the lodge to join the rest of the group who had arrived by jeep. There were cold glasses of local beer and crisp Nepalese munchies as we gathered on a covered patio and watched a beautiful sunset. Later, we were invited into the dining room, where pelts of snow leopard and tiger hung from the walls of what once was a royal hunting lodge. Then we sat down at a long old wooden table and enjoyed a delicious buffet of BBQ chicken, roasted wild boar, and steamed fresh vegetables, as well as fresh baked naan from an old brick oven. Throughout dinner, we

shared an evening of lively conversation about our various travel experiences before bidding farewell around 10pm. The ride back to the city in the jeep was very quiet as the streets were virtually deserted. The next day, Ranier, a UNEP employee from Holland, invited everyone to his house for dinner – a special event arranged in my honor! Mr. Kotta picked me up at 7pm, together with Bassanta who was carrying a precious bottle of Glenfiddich whiskey to celebrate the evening. We drove through the dark narrow streets, dodging all manner of man, beast, and vehicle, but somehow Mr. Kotta made sense of the maze at night and saw landmarks I would certainly have missed. At last we arrived at Ranier's house, a lovely place in the middle of a beautiful garden behind an old red brick wall. We had drinks in the garden before sitting down to a delicious dinner of various Indian dishes and a quiet evening of conversation. Then after dinner, Bassanta opened his bottle of Glenfiddich and we all toasted to the successful week of training classes at ICIMOD. Almost precisely at 10pm, people began to say farewell, supporting my observation that Kathmandu closes down early.

I woke up the next morning, the day of my departure to New Delhi, to find steady monsoonal rain outside! (definitely no view of the Himalayas today) Lunch in the ICIMOD canteen was fried rice and Thai "Tam Yan" soup, which was delicious but very spicy! My training class ended at 4pm with a short thank you ceremony and speech by the director of ICIMOD. Everyone in the class thanked me personally, which I really appreciated. Then I collected my luggage from the hotel and checked out. The hotel manager had to verify my American Express card by telephone and was told he could expect a "ring back" in 10 minutes. Meanwhile, I took the opportunity to buy a couple of beautiful Nepalese paintings and an old Tibetan prayer wheel from the gift shop. (they are still displayed in my living room) Before leaving the ICIMOD office for the airport, one of the staff took my luggage, airline ticket, and passport in order to check me in at the airport and get my boarding pass – it was amazing VIP treatment that I had not expected, but which I sincerely appreciated! In the meantime, Surrendra invited me to his house nearby for a drink. And as we shared a cup of tea, the sound of drums, cymbals, gongs, and chanting came from the house across the street. Surrendra said it was a celebration for having done good business. (the family sold handmade Tibetan carpets) Besides all the music (aka noise), lots of candles were lit and placed in the street for good fortune – fascinating to watch!

Shortly afterwards, the ICIMOD jeep arrived to take me to the airport, where another of the ICIMOD staff met me and handed me a boarding pass, my ticket, and passport, all the essentials for travel. (later I discovered that my baggage had been seriously overweight, but thanks to ICIMOD, I had not been charged for excess baggage!) I proceeded through Immigration and Customs, easily afforded again by the ICIMOD staff. Once in the small departure lounge, I ordered a can of beer, rather than a large bottle since the flight was scheduled to depart within 20 minutes. As I sat at the small bar, I looked at the menu and couldn't help noticing some very unusual drinks, such as "Hijacker", "Forced Landing", and "Around the World"! (I had no idea what was in them) As I continued to wait in the bar with my cold can of San Miguel beer, I read the day's copy of the local "Rising Nepal" newspaper. On page 3 was a short story titled "Drug Addicts Arrested – Rajkumar and Shankar of municipal ward 3 were caught red handed while they were smoking "brown sugar"! (I had no idea what brown sugar was, but it certainly was illegal!) Meanwhile, as I continued to wait, it was becoming obvious the flight would be delayed, in addition to being seriously overbooked. Then I heard the names of various passengers being called to the airline desk and told they would be put on the next flight at 8am tomorrow morning. Luckily, my name was not on the "hit list" – the joys of traveling!

Later, I found an airline employee and enquired about the length of the departure delay and was told the incoming flight should arrive within 5 minutes, allowing us to take off in the next 30 minutes. (so much for asking an airline employee) By this point the crowd was getting restless when suddenly two huge trays of samosas and cakes appeared at the snack bar! Passengers immediately began to rush to the snack bar, holding their boarding passes in hand. I sat and waited until the mob made its way back to the departure lounge with their allotment of snacks in hand. Then I took my boarding pass to the little

snack bar to be stamped, entitling me to one vegetable samosa, a small cake, and a cup of tea. I added some hot chili sauce to my samosa and proceeded to have my “dinner”, which was surprisingly pretty tasty! Finally, at 10pm we were called to board the plane, now departing well over 2 hours late. As I looked around my seat, I could see the aircraft was “jammed” with people and huge amounts of baggage. Among the passengers was a large group of French tourists trying to find seats. The overhead bin above my seat was stuffed with 3 huge bags that were never going to fit, despite the repeated “shoving” by the passengers. At last, we were taking off, in spite of several passengers still standing in the aisle and without seatbelts fastened! But at least we were airborne, however, I saw no flight attendants during the entire 90-minute flight to New Delhi! (needless to say, no refreshments were served – in fact nothing was served!)

I arrived in New Delhi just before midnight, over 3 hours late, but at least I was now at the destination for my next work assignment, a GIS software training class for the technical staff in the ESRI-India office. As I checked into my hotel room in New Delhi, I had a notebook filled with memories of my first trip to the fabled city of Kathmandu!

Over the next 10 years, I would visit Kathmandu several times, but my first trip remains my most memorable one and I hope you enjoy this trip to Kathmandu as much as I did!

[Views of Kathmandu]

