

To Mustang *Lo and Behold* *Into Slightly Thin Air*

by JED DAVIS

Early last spring, Linus Story decided to trek in Nepal with Rick Wilcox, an acclaimed mountaineer and proprietor of International Mountain Climbing School in North Conway, New Hampshire. On a weekend hike up Mt. Lafayette with Jim Hamilton, Linus hooked Jim and by Sunday night, Jim's wife Laurie, Gerry Whiting, John and Sue Gross and I were also on line after phone calls from Linus and Jim. It was a reunion of sorts, since we had been part of a group that rafted down the Middle Fork of the Salmon River in Idaho five years ago and get together on White Mountain weekends through the years since we worked in the AMC Huts in the 1960's.

The trekking party quickly filled with sixteen paid clients and four guides.

Guides:

- Rick Wilcox & Celia Davis of IMCS, North Conway, N.H.
- AJ Jones & Nicole Gould of IMCS, Fryeburg, Maine

Clients:

- Jed Davis, Manchester, Maine
- Bob (Linus) Story, Norway, Maine
- Jim & Laurie Hamilton, Cohasset, Mass.
- Gerry Whiting, Yarmouth, Maine
- John & Susan Gross, Winthrop, Maine
- Bob Jayne & Joyce Carp, Bridgton, Maine
- Marge Chamberlain, Williamstown, Mass.
- Sandy Kelley, Williamstown, Mass.
- Nancy Green, Hoboken, N.J.
- Nancy & Henry Hamlin, Rochester, N.Y.
- Ron Mallory, Center Conway, N.H.
- Guide posing as Client: Jay Luff, Center Harbor, N.H.

The following is an account from my daybook with added thoughts, recollections and editing from fellow trekkers.

Friday, October 16, 1998: it's approaching 5:00 p.m. and everyone in the store has asked me more than once, "Are you excited?" and "When are you leaving?" My daughter Megan stopped in with roommates Kamini and Katie to say bon voyage and slip me a good luck token, then went on to L.L.Bean. Their destination caused a twinge of doubt and I wondered if maybe I should stop on my way down to Gerry's that evening on the chance I would notice something I had forgotten and could still stuff into my mule bag already loaded and weighing in at fifty-five pounds. I left a little after five and headed home for dinner with Frannie and Anna (pasta in accordance with Chuck Robinson's "Jet Lag formula" high carbo dinners, protein breakfast and lunch).

During dinner, John called from Portland (where he and Susan were attending a five o'clock wedding). He gave me instructions to get into the clinic and find a box he had forgotten. I went out with visions of missing the plane because I was being held for breaking and entering. But I found the box containing gifts for Laurie and Joyce, alternatives to the "square bottle" that had proved problematic for Susan during several training attempts. These bright red pee bottles with accompanying female prosthetics were sure to be a big hit in the tents at night. Obviously, Susan had not been receptive to my idea that she demonstrate for us the problems she was encountering in using the "square bottle" so we could offer constructive comments to improve her efficiency. Anyway, when I got home, Megan and Kamini were back, we said good-byes again and Frannie and I drove to Gerry's, bypassing L.L.Bean's.

The Whitings were just finishing dinner when we arrived.

We met Gerry's daughter Kendra and Tim (for the first time) and spent a few minutes with



Gerry and Meta before Francie took off on the return trip to Augusta (after letting us hear a full volume rendition of Bob Seger's "Kathmandu"). A short glass of single malt helped occupy the time and Gerry showed me his sawmill in the barn while we awaited the arrival of John and Susan. After they arrived, we spent a few minutes poking and lifting mule bags, comparing thoughts about equipment and all went to bed feeling that we had done our best and could probably borrow anything we may have overlooked.

Saturday, October 17 Flight to Nepal

Up early with Gerry for eggs and coffee and after the rest arose, he and I walk out to see Tim off with the mill to a job site. Then we wander through the woods to the site of Kendra's future house.

We are all in the car by 7:40 a.m. arriving at the Portland bus station at 8:00 where we meet Linus, wife Bonnie and Joyce. Bus to Boston (great way to get to Boston/Logan - \$20 one way/\$32 round trip). The movie "Hard Rain" sets the tone for movies we were to see during the following thirty-seven hours traveling over various land masses and bodies of water. We have the inspiration to create our own script for a Nepal adventure movie similar in plot and creative content but it never materialized.

I guess the trip turned out to be more exciting than a movie!)

Shortly after arrival at Logan, Rick, Celia and Jay Luff, in Camp Tecumseh T-shirt show up with all the International Mountain Climbing School gear. Soon Jim and Laurie follow and cameras appear to begin the official record of the trip. Nancy Green (Hoboken) arrives via family base in Brookline, Massachusetts. and Ron Mallory from New Hampshire appears. Then we all wait nervously for Bob Jayne who is to catch a cab, hopefully in time, from his shift at Mass Eye and Ear. Joyce has his mule bag and if he misses the flight he will meet us in Los Angeles. He does make it in plenty of time, we all check in and head for the gate and Los Angeles a brief six hours away.

The flight to Los Angeles is uneventful. I take my first melatonin and sleep for 2½ hours in the first effort to begin living at the schedule of our arrival time in Kathmandu (no meals or other refreshment for me on that leg of the trip). I awake and watch "Six Nights-Seven Days" that follows the dramatic impact of "Hard Rain" perfectly.

In LA we walk as a group to the international terminal. Here Joyce and Bob go off to meet Joyce's father. AJ and Nicole join us and Sandy and Marge connect with the group. Jim, Laurie, John, Susan and I adjourn to the Thai Air Executive Lounge, the first of many privileges we are to enjoy from our \$350 (one way) upgrade to business class from Los Angeles to Bangkok. Linus and Gerry join us shortly.

At plane time we are herded into a Boeing 747 and then the seven of us with upgrades are ushered upstairs to our plush accommodations. Linus and I sit together in comfortably wide seats, each with their individual video screen (During the flight, six movies are available, none even close to Academy Award consideration.) We are periodically

interrupted by silk-clad stewardesses bringing juice, water or warm damp towels. We sampled the St. Emilion and Grand Cru, returning to St. Emilion with dinner of prawns, as the Grand Cru was a bit too sweet. Linus follows dinner with Port and I with Drambuie. Sleep a little (try to stay awake), read, watch movies or GPS maps of plane's position etc. Sandwiches late and then a second meal. 1 1/2 hours to Osaka. We are behind schedule, so we remain on board for about 45 minutes while the plane is "refreshed" and crew changed. I take my second melatonin before take-off, have a small meal (breakfast), and sleep 2 1/2 hours. Flight to Bangkok about 5 1/2 hours.

Layover in Bangkok of four hours is tedious. The airport shops are very commercial, repetitive and have no character. We are all exhausted and ready to reach our destination. We browse the duty free shop and buy Scotch for trekking happy hour (Jed, Linus, and Gerry). Then back to economy class for 3 1/2-hour flight to Kathmandu. Clouds preclude Himalayan views.

Monday, October 19 KA-KA-KA-KA-KA-KA-KA-

KATHMANDU!!!

Typical long lines for visas, but not too bad. Gerry and I stand in line with a man who sells gaming machines to casinos. (Who would have thought, Himalayas and crap tables?) Urgen Sherpa, Rick's sirdar, meets us and we head outside through aggressive Nepali porters, pushing carts loaded with our mule bags to a bus that is only marginally able to hold all of us and gear. Children are begging as we load the bus at the airport (actually we watch the Sherpa staff load the bus). Urgen presents us all with garlands of flowers and we head off through the sprawling city of Kathmandu with a multitude of emotions. What an eye-ful for our first taste of Nepal. As we wind through traffic into the city in our very cramped bus, perhaps a small feeling of disquiet enters some minds as we contemplate an eight-hour bus ride from Kathmandu to Pokhara. The humanity of Kathmandu is cacophonous, crowded, odiferous, hot, dusty and very definitely third world. I am immediately reminded of our years in Africa and throughout the trip the parallels are remarkable with only slight cultural differences.

We check into the Tibet Hotel, fourteen months old and very pleasant. The bus has to back-up to get a straight shot at the alley in front of the hotel and even then we must keep our hands inside as vines growing on the walls brush against the windows.

Rick says that on our return we will stay in Thamel, which is the shopping district. Buses are not allowed in that section of the city because the streets are too narrow. This gives us some impression of the diversity of this city of approximately 750,000, although I think no one really knows the true population. The King's palace appears to be the tallest building and I doubt it is over six stories (there is a tower or minaret taller). The city sprawls for miles. Most buildings at ground level are blocked into small storefronts, most often no more than unlit openings with one or two display cases. There are produce shops spilling onto the street, butcher shops with freshly-slaughtered goat, sheep or beef displayed on a concrete slab on the floor. Auto repair shops are not uncommon featuring

a compressor powered by a single piston engine chugging along in a dusty lot beside a block wall. A great place to visit, but I question if I would like to live here.

Later we congregate on the hotel roof for a beer and watch canaries, doves and other birds, new to us, fly in non-ending flocks from the mountainside across the city. Rick gives us a brief preview of the next day's plans and includes the news Urgan has informed him that the plane we will be taking from Jomsom to Pokhara at the conclusion of our trek has established strict limits of 35 pounds per person. The new policy is the result of a crash earlier in the season due to overloading. This news is met with groans and grumblings since we had heard continually from Rick that the mule bags could be loaded with up to seventy pounds. Most of us were, in fact, proud that we had managed to cram our mule bags to the max with our meticulously researched and thought out gear lists and ended up well under sixty pounds. So with memories of the night before we launched on the Middle Fork of the Salmon, we head to our rooms to repack, leaving ten to twenty pounds of what we had earlier thought was essential material. This will be stored in the hotel until our return. Later we go downstairs to dinner of rice, chicken, pasta, another beer and then to bed exhausted. (Linus had suggested we avoid the elevator, as there was a tendency for entire sections of Kathmandu to lose power for extended periods of time and it might prove frustrating to be stranded between floors and, in fact, we did experience such black outs.) The continual barking of dogs at night we have heard so much about is not in evidence; either there are no dogs in this section of the city or they have all been eaten.

I change some money at the hotel 67 rupees to the dollar.

Tuesday, October 20 Bus to Pokhara Campsite



Up at 6:30 a.m. load bus to Pokhara, leaving gear to be stored, passports and plane tickets with Urgan to deposit somewhere for safekeeping. These buses hold about twenty-five (or more in those that have middle seats that fold out). We start out through Kathmandu traffic streets jammed with vehicles, bikes, rickshaws, motorcycles (100cc seems the preference), three wheel cabs, small cars, and the omnipresent "TATA" buses. The trip is about 150 km countryside beautiful small villages all hillsides terraced "Indiana Jones" bridges extend for frightening distances across the Trisuli River which is on our right for most of the trip. Most of the buildings are brick construction, the majority with corrugated metal roofs, many held down with rocks we call Nepali nails. Just like Frannie and I saw in Africa, the choice is for the "high tech" industrial produced option over the cheaper and far cooler thatch that I am sure was the historical material, (probably rice stalks). We make a couple stops to buy soda (45 rupees about 75 cents) and use the facilities or the bushes then a lunch stop. We have a bagged lunch of fruit, egg, etc. while the Sherpas order from the menu, and we get our first view of daal bhaat (rice and lentils with assorted "sauces") and the preferred method of consumption (by hand). Vendors, adults and children, hawk bananas, roasted peanuts and various grains. John bargains for

a fiddle that doesn't exactly look like the type with which he will be accompanying our evening songfests, but what the hell, a souvenir is a souvenir. Jim buys a Nepali folk tape which the bus driver plays loudly on the tape deck.

The bus trip continues much to Linus' chagrin. The road is barely two lanes, unlined and signless and the driver is using radar or some means of navigation unobservable to us. His preferred means of passing slower vehicles, and there are many, is to gain momentum on straight stretches and sling-shot around on a blind uphill curve occasionally giving a brief blast on the horn to notify oncoming traffic and his own passengers to take note and say any final prayers or comments that might be appropriate. Jim and John who are sitting behind the driver notice one of the dashboard controls is a kind of two-toned switch that sometimes emits a high pitched blast for the vehicle he is about to pass, other times a lower pitch for pedestrians to step aside.

At Pokhara, a smaller, lower, brighter city than Kathmandu but similar in organization we go to a tent site for trekking groups on the shore of Phewa Lake. Our tents are already set up and we meet a few more of our Sherpa staff, but only briefly because the priority for a few of us is to remedy the dry and dusty condition of our throats. Gerry, Linus and I inspect the recreational facilities at the adjacent public pier in the muddy lake and then head up the block where I spy an upstairs veranda (under a thatched roof) that offers San Miguel, Tuborg and Carlsberg beer and assorted culinary delicacies. We meet a New Yorker, Jeff Grayson, who booked a flight, hopped a bus for Pokhara and is currently trying to arrange his trek now from scratch. Also, at another table is a group from Vermont that just finished their trek. We attempt to engage them in conversation and find they prefer to keep their conversation among themselves. This is not uncommon we discover. With all the trekkers we meet on the lower part of our own trek, there is surprising little exchange of information or greetings beyond hellos and Namastes. Of course there isn't time to stop and research everyone's origins, but it seems to me there is almost an attitude of avoidance. Perhaps we all are a bit offended that so many other foreigners are participating in our personal pilgrimage.

We leave the bar with the waiter who we asked about FAX/phone facilities. He leads us a couple doors up and Linus attempts to FAX Bonnie through his office. Attempt, because on the first try, someone apparently picked up the phone on the FAX in Norway, Maine. But what is an extra twelve dollars when you are calling loved ones on the other side of the world?

We head back to camp and as we are milling around waiting for dinner, a striking young Tibetan woman approaches and begins the process we shall encounter over and over: offering Tibetan handicrafts for sale. We have an enjoyable time dickering for trinkets. I buy a Tibetan amulet. Linus picks up a couple of bracelets. Jim and I go in on a pair of silver bracelets. Ron demonstrates a particularly fine bargaining skill. The typical items of trade include prayer wheels, "eye"beads, necklaces and bracelets of various bone and beads, knives, incense holders, religious amulets and numerous other trinkets.

The whistle blows (an annoying method of announcing the meal that would continue for the next two weeks) and we have our dinner of daal bhaat, potatoes, cauliflower and spam.

The temperature is hot and humidity makes it stickier. We were not expecting this kind of heat. After dinner, all are exhausted and we hit the tents (Linus and I are tent mates). It is too hot for sleeping bags, but we fall to sleep from 9:30 p.m. to 1:00 a.m., obviously not entirely caught up to new time zones which should be okay by next night.

Wednesday, October 21 Naya Pul to Hille

At 5:30 a.m. we have our first introduction to early morning tea and the wake up call that we were to hear every morning for the rest of our trek in the cook's helper's high whiny trill, "Excuse me! Good morning!" This greeting is followed by the shaking of our tent door and the option of black tea or milk tea and a biscuit. Warm wash water arrives about twenty minutes later. Breakfast is granola with hot milk, eggs-over-sort-of-easy and more tea. We notice snow-capped mountain tips that had been hidden by clouds on our arrival yesterday peaking tantalizingly over the nearby hills to the north of the lake.

Bob approaches me and wants to assure that I was not planning to shave during the trip. I of course answer in the affirmative. Ron, Jay, Jim and Gerry also appear to be on the same track. It will be interesting to see who keeps them.

We break camp, climb aboard a "new" bus and travel to the other side of Pokhara where Urgen stops the bus and we are treated to a wildly spectacular panoramic view and photo op of Annapurna 2-3-4, Machupuchare, and Dhaulagiri from the top of the Tibet Hotel. Then begins a two hour bus ride, perhaps even more frightening than yesterday's because of the steeper gradients and this driver's refusal to engage gears on downhill sections relying solely on what sounded to us as increasingly reluctant brakes. The bus in front of us stops with brakes flambé.

The trail begins at Naya Pul (Jim says it must mean "Place of the Burning Brakes") where we disembark, shoulder our daypacks and begin our trek. Starting downhill at 11:45 we immediately encounter a group of trekkers coming out, the beginning of what is to be a constant stream of people that lasts until we pass Jomsom five days later. We are on the southern portion of the popular Annapurna Circuit.

We are travelling up the Bhurungdi River valley south to north. The vegetation is tropical with banana trees still in evidence. We find ourselves constantly taking our eyes off the trail into the distances ahead to view here and there a snow-capped peak. The trail is amazing; in fact, it is not a trail, but a foot road that has been a major route for moving people and produce for centuries. Because of the topography, the invention of the wheel had no effect on transportation in the mountainous regions of Nepal.

We walk only about an hour and are diverted from the trail by one of our Sherpas into the yard of a teahouse for lunch. We would all rather trek on but as we are to discover, 11:30

is lunchtime. It is very hot, we are still working with the effects of time differences and our attitude is sluggish, many of us looking for a shady area to lay back and await the cook's progress. A woman gives her daughter and then her son a cold water bath from a standpipe in the back of the yard positioned in a concrete stall attached to a building housing the toilet facility. Then she begins her laundry. All this in the mere hour plus it took to prepare and consume the lunch of green beans, bread and sausage, always with condiments and pots of tea and hot water. Will we get used to slaking our thirst with hot drinks?

On the road again and we walk until 3:30 where we camp in a small field behind a tea house in the little town of Hille (elevation 5,100'). Beer is 105 rupees about \$1.50 (said to increase in price the higher we get) - I skipped it; it was warm. I did have a "Mango Frooti" for 25 rupees. The pattern begins to form. Jay and Henry need their brew whether or not it is cold.

Dinner is in a little open shed, pasta and ham - I try the "hot sauce," a mixture of peppers and garlic in oil. It is good but we seldom see it during our trip, I think because Rick is not a fan of hot and has impressed on Urgan and the staff that "our" tastes do not parallel those of the Nepalese staff. Dessert is pudding.

As dinner ends, we are treated to a beautiful view of lights from the houses perched on the terraced mountainside. It rains during the night so it gets cool enough to pull out the sleeping bag (to sleep under, not in). I have a great sleep.

Thursday, October 22 Hille to Ghorapani

Breakfast of hot cereal, French toast and omelet.

In the evening the "septic" system, i.e. the pipe that drained from the outhouse toilet into the adjacent rice paddy, backed up and our staff, with facemasks, undertook the task of unclogging the pipe. This morning, the situation reoccurs or was never properly fixed last night.

Every morning begins anywhere between 4:30 and 6:30 a.m., depending on the expected day's hike, with the "Excuse me. Good morning." tea procedure. We next coax ourselves out of the tents when our bowls of warm wash water arrive. We perform our morning ablutions and immediately pack our mule bags leaving our daypacks outside our tents. The mule bags are picked up and packed out by the porters or packed on the donks and leave camp while we are being served breakfast. At the same time, a few of the staff load up with enough food and kitchen equipment and head out in order to be ahead and preparing lunch at the proper place and time.

On the road at 8:45 a.m. We will go to Ghorapani today, something over 9,000 feet. The "road" is pretty well maintained. It is almost a continual rock staircase, and by 11:30 (lunch), we are over 7,000 feet.

There are innumerable trekkers, guides and porters, close to a continual stream, far outnumbering any Nepali traffic. Also interesting, we are almost never out of sight of dwellings and around every few turns is a teahouse (restaurant). If it were not for the incredible stimuli to our eyes and minds from people and scenery, we would certainly find this continuous uphill plodding grueling.

The entire hillside is terraced and planted with rice or barley. After 7,000 feet it becomes only an occasional house with a small group of adjacent terraces. Across the valley it seems amazing the isolation of these small farms high on the hillside. Finally houses give way to rhododendron forest with only a few terraces here and there carved out of the trees and mountain. The last 1,800 feet is pretty much high forest trail, the stone steps dropping behind with the houses. It begins to drizzle and we figure it is about another 600-800 feet in elevation, so we trudge on. Gerry, Linus, Jay, Sandy, Nancy G and I arrive at Ghorapani in drizzle no Sherpas in sight, no tents, no porters. After awhile we continue on through this small cluster of hotels/tea houses and discover we had stopped in "lower" Ghorapani ten minutes below the actual village. Just over the crest of the hill, we find the tents set up behind a restaurant in "upper" Ghorapani, 9,300 feet.

The entire trip is measured in hours, not miles. We never know how far we are to travel in a day. All distance is gauged by the time it will take. Four of our party have watches with altitude gauges. So our calculations of distance are estimations based on increases and decreases in altitude, the time we hike, and our own hiking experience.

We change in an open shed with drizzle continuing cool enough for fleece jacket and go into the restaurant where there are two electric lights and a wood stove. Inside the restaurant it begins to get toasty, beer is obtained, tea arrives, but the total dinner experience takes two hours and before dessert, we are all totally exhausted and begin to retire to the tents. We learn as we go that tea time is a half to an hour before dinner will be ready. As the trip progresses, some of us decide to skip tea time some nights in favor of a little nap or an in-tent happy hour. We gained 4,000 feet today. It was a tiring uphill trek but the tremendous variety of stimuli makes it much more memorable for all we have seen than our physical weariness. At night I sleep mostly under my sleeping bag.

It is amazing where we find electricity here and there along the entire route of our trek. Varying size hydro projects and fickle, sometimes seemingly bizarre transmission systems appear in many incredibly remote areas more likely the result of foreign aid projects than aggressive development efforts by the government.

Friday, October 23 Ghorapani to Tatopani

Up at 4:30 a.m. and fifteen of us go up Poon Hill, one kilometer and 900 feet above Ghorapani. We are in the clouds as we start, the temperature is cool but, as usual, I begin to sweat and soon the T-shirt comes off so I will not be too cold when we reach the top (I did bring a wind breaker). There are a number of other people on the trail with us. The idea here is to be on top for the sunrise.

About half way up, we are treated to a spectacular view of Dhaulagiri through a huge gap in the clouds. Rick points out landmarks, ridges, and routes with which he is familiar and the area Dave Seidman, a friend and OH, was climbing when he and his group were killed in an avalanche in the 1970's.

As we approach the top, which is crowned by a short observation platform, we are greeted by the sight of perhaps a hundred slightly earlier starters. The only thing missing is the twenty-five cent binocular telescopes. The clouds refuse to lift and as dawn breaks, a fact noted by the lightening of the surrounding mist, the crowd shuffles and eventually begins to depart down the hill. A few of us remain and are treated to glimpses of the massive peaks to our north and east, but are denied the full panoramic vistas that have made Poon Hill famous.

After breakfast we head DOWN. We will drop 6,000 feet today, slipping down the valley of the Ghar Kola (River) to the Kali Gandaki.

The road is very inconsistent compared to the southern route we ascended. It is not "paved" as regularly as yesterday. There are stretches little more than a dirt track but the tea houses and the stream of trekkers remain constant. There are many couples with single guides or three to five trekkers with two guides. The hillsides on this side are still terraced and farmed but the population density appears to be less. We stop and watch a calf being born in a house yard.

It is a long, long day of downhill. Eventually we come across a narrower stretch with the mountain on our left and find some of our porters stopped at a pass that leads very steeply down a rocky section to the Kali Gandaki seen far below. When we finally reach the bottom, our legs fatigued from the days pounding, we are greeted with the information gleaned from a sign at the local check point that Tatopani, our day's objective, which was until two months ago a matter of minutes up the far side of the river, is now an hour and a half away. This is the result of rerouting the trail after a massive landslide blocked the river, entirely stopping the flow behind a dike extending from the east side origin onto the western wall of the valley 175 feet high. If we knew more about the local geography, it is possible a few of us may have thought about turning left and exiting down the Kali Gandaki valley to Beni to await the return of these crazy trekkers in about twelve days, but we trudge wearily on. Gerry, Jay, Nancy G and the Hamlins are ahead. AJ, Nicole, Linus and I are together a short way behind.

We approach a long suspension bridge across the Kali Gandaki. As the Kali Gandaki is to be the route of the remainder of the trek and our goal, Lo Manthang, is near the head waters of the river, I will take a minute to give some insight into the river's name and geography I found in "The Snow Leopard" by Peter Mattheissen: "Kali means "black female" or "dark woman." Kali the Black is the female aspect of Time and Death, and the Devourer of All Things, the consort of the Hindu god of the Himalaya. Great Shiva the ReCreator and Destroyer; her black image with its necklace of human skulls, is the emblem of this dark river that, rumbling down out of hidden peaks and vast clouds of

unknowing, has filled the traveler with dread since the first human tried to cross and was borne away."



So here we are standing at the east end of this Indiana Jones suspension bridge. The approach is from a narrow trail carved from the rock cliff. A group of Nepalese are clearly enjoying their trip across, laughing and alternatively scampering or halting to savor the view and breeze as it rushes up the river valley. After they exit, we begin our entry onto the span, only to quickly return to the safety of the mountainside as a few cattle decide they would rather go right away than wait their turn.

We feel it would be more prudent to allow them to cross alone. When we finally begin our own crossing, all are content to meditate quietly, keeping our thoughts to ourselves and our words under our breath. Stopping mid-river, I gaze alternately upstream and immediately down into the rushing torrent of dark gray glacial runoff. My peripheral vision detects movement to the west. A group of Nepalese with a few donkeys is approaching and the bridge width advises that beast and human travel in single file if they would ever even want to be on the bridge at the same time. I turn and hastily though cautiously and continue my crossing.

My feeling is that these bridges were not the favorite part of the trip for most of us, but did hold a definite fascination. Jim calls them "Apprehension Bridges". I am certain there were proportionately more pictures of bridges taken than mountains relative to the number of each that we encountered along the trek. Also, it was interesting to watch the attitude with which certain members approached and crossed bridges. Sandy was by far the most interested and appreciative. I saw her so interested in the construction of one bridge that she crawled almost on hands and knees to more closely inspect the intricate construction. Linus always wanted to demonstrate how he could walk across these bridges on his hands but deferred to the still less than perfect condition of his back (he had a spinal fusion in April) and so contented himself with a light-hearted skipping gait as he crossed. I felt a great sense of accomplishment if I could cross an entire bridge without ever touching the sides with my hands, a feat I achieved only once or twice. It is also interesting to note that bridges with wooden platforms are often of an age that the planking is in serious need of repair which the local Nepali accomplished by placing a flat rock of greater size than the hole it needed to cover, thus frequently adding hundreds of pounds to the load of the structure.

Our small group eventually makes the west side of the river and we immediately see the direction of the new trail. Far ahead and far overhead we can see Gerry and company and a bit closer Nancy and Henry. We soon overtake Nancy and Henry and find their pace entirely to our liking. There is not an overabundance of conversation in our exhausted sweaty crew and the air of frustration is tangible as we find the trail to be little more than a scraping from the wall of the hill-cum-mountain that we are ascending. About two-thirds of the way up we encounter a ledge section beside which the trail builders have

attached two fixed ropes (of which AJ later told us only one was "fixed"), one thicker and knotted the other thinner and even more untrustworthy. It is here that we begin to fully appreciate the stamina and intensity of our two senior members. Henry silently faces the new obstacle with intense resolve and Nancy, summing up the feelings of all of us utters one of the finest "oh shits" that I have ever heard in the mountains. Linus and I go ahead here, leaving Henry and Nancy to their own pace and AJ and Nicole remain at the (less than) fixed ropes to assist the remainder of the party now visible at the bottom of the "cliff."

At the top we find a marvelous example of entrepreneurial effort. A small structure of branches and thatch has been erected, and a meager assortment of soft drinks is offered for

a very reasonable price. We are later told that this refreshment stand was erected virtually hours after this temporary bypass trail was built. Linus and I succumb to the temptation of a coolish coke and then begin our descent toward Tatopani.

The trip down is equally precipitous but the anticipation of our destination makes it seem easy. We encounter a checkpoint where the uniformed officer queries us for our trekking permits and, after some hesitation and confusion, I discover the answer that I would use in similar instances through the trip. I just say "Urgen Sherpa," point behind me at the trail and the message seems to be conveyed that we are merely a couple of foolish boys on an organized trek.

Once again connecting with the river, we are disappointed to discover this collection of structures is not Tatopani. However, we are quickly rewarded up the trail, a road once more, with a sign announcing the entrance to our goal. Here I spy a woman sitting on the floor of her house carding wool and halt to attempt a trade for a spindle, the request of my sister Cyndie. We communicate poorly, and although she continually nods and shows recognition of the wool I pull from my pack carried from the US specifically for the purpose of trade, I am unable to adequately communicate my request. Thoughts of waiting for Urgen to arrive are quickly dismissed in favor of seeking the respite of camp.

Walking up the "main street" of Tatopani, we encounter a hotel with impressive courtyard offering happy hour prices, an extensive menu and hot showers! Shops display an amazing assortment of products and produce. We are in the largest village along the trek route we have seen. And then, from the doorway of a restaurant we are hailed by the loud voices of those who had preceded us. There they are, sitting comfortably around a table with sixteen ounce Tuborg beers equal to their number. We decide we will join them before we finish our tour of the village (or before we fall down). The beer couldn't arrive quickly enough but it does and it is cold!

Nancy H and Henry join us shortly. Henry buys a round and the atmosphere is exhausted celebration. There is no complaining that today's hike was much more difficult than any of us anticipated. The trek was not supposed to contain a surprise like that last hill at the

end of the day but no one expected it to be a cake walk, and the entire crew is bonded through the physical experience.

As the group finally arrives we exhaust the hotel's supply of beer so Jay, Gerry and I go on a beer run. Electricity along the Kali Gandaki allows for the presence of refrigerators that translates into cold beer and this is one of those times that a beer never tasted so good. (We had a few of those times on this trek). The donks eventually arrive from a more circuitous route around the mountain of the new trail. The tent site is by the river down steep steps from the restaurant's terrace and as camp is made, we leave the comfortable atmosphere of the upper level patio and immediately thoughts of cleansing the grime of the day supercede even thoughts of food.

Tatopani means hot water (tato hot, pani water) the name deriving from hot springs that erupt in and near the river. Linus, Gerry and I find a spot and enjoy the cold Kali and a trace of warmth from an entering hot spring. The outlet area looks unenticing. Then back to the tent for a little Black Label and we are content that both body and soul have been cleansed by this day's activities.

Saturday, October 24 Tatopani to Ghasa

Saturday morning we begin the fourth day of our trek, up the Kali Gandaki valley through a farming region. There are not nearly as many tea houses and the road is frequently a true mountain trail. Road maintenance does not receive high priority (or funding). Along the river's edge there begin to be some precarious areas, mostly the result of sections that have received only very basic repair after landslides. Then we enter a village where again the way is "paved." Towards the end of the trekking day, there is a long gradual descent along the east side of the river and then a bridge to the west side. The beauty and symmetry of the well-constructed stairway up from the river is lost behind the creeping fatigue, and the meticulously cobbled street through the village of Ghasa takes a back seat to the image of that tent and mule bag awaiting where we can roll out the sleeping mat, get a little wash water (maybe even a shower), probably a beer and a chance to stop walking. It is beginning to become clear that just as lunch was at 11:30, the campsites are always at the far end of town. (Now I don't want to give the impression we are not having fun, but there is a certain point in each day when I/we just need to get to the end of the trail.)

Ghasa is a very attractive town with nice hotels. We have a good campsite in a hotel yard with warm shower and warm beer. We eat on the narrow porch of the building between the hotel and the showers. Jeff Grayson appears (remember Jeff from the upstairs bar in Pokhara?). He flew to Jomsom, hiked to Muktinath and is now on his way "down." He is travelling with a Swiss guy who is so sun tanned he looks dried and stuffed. Also, we meet a couple from Hawaii who biked through Europe, left their bikes in Greece, traveled through India and plan to eventually end up in New Zealand where they feel the guy can get a job "with boats." When asked when they planned to return to Hawaii, they answered, "It will still be there."

Let's see, some other thoughts: Joyce has lost her voice, Bob is waging the battle of the bowels, so far the bowels are giving no "ground." Nancy H tripped on a stone stair in Ghorapani and has a bruise (but the fall looked like it could have been a lot worse). Rick is getting over his cold. It seems he has given it to Linus.

Sunday, October 25 Ghasa to Tukuche



Fifth day of the trek. We leave Ghasa with a great view of Dhauligiri's southeast ridge. For over a half-hour, we walk opposite a huge slide (both high and long) on the other side of the river. Nilgiri is to our right and ahead. The trail goes through a forested area and we follow four young girls in school uniforms with adult/teacher (see picture).

After a river crossing we stop in a grove of trees and eat fresh cold apples one of the Sherpas, Concha, bought from a local man carrying a basket of them. This is a local crop we enjoy throughout the rest of our trip. (Oh yes, John is experiencing a love of the bush; he cannot seem to stay on the trail for more than half an hour or so without taking a diversionary trip into the puckerbrush). I take the heavy pack from Jum-Ling, my porter, up about ¼ mile of switchbacks. I'm glad he is carrying it, not me. The weight, carried by the tumpline, puts incredible pressure on the muscles in the back of my neck necessitating use of my hands to pull down (between head and shoulders) to triangulate the pressure. Even then the pressure is so strong it is an effort to raise my head enough to look any farther than a yard beyond my feet. (I have been wanting to try this from the first day.)

There is very little evidence of recreational activity. The life here is at a pretty basic subsistence level. We have seen one repeated source of play in the form of swings made out of bamboo poles. Some of these have been huge. The children are attractive and cute, the young people are handsome but there are very few older people I would call handsome or beautiful. Life is hard and it shows. After working in the fields, carrying loads up and down the mountainsides, living in smoke-filled houses and doing every chore imaginable by hand, bodies are unable to disguise the toll that has been taken. It seems to be especially noticeable in the women who often just look used up.



Every village is different. We move up through a village on a plateau, Lete. This is the first village since Tatopani that the residents do not have to fear that landslides at some

time will alter the terrain near or on top of their houses. There is a mountain to our left whose northeast slope is a huge slab. As we pass it, we enter a town where Gerry and I stop to watch and photograph three men "building" a stone house, chipping each stone until it fits into place. At the end of the village as we stop for a rest, a Nepali comes out of the hotel we are sitting near and points out a family of langur monkeys on the rocks a little way up the side of the mountain.

We discover ganja growing wild along the river. I guess some of us will be higher than 8,000 feet tonight. Then there is an area where road is "paved" for almost a mile, part through a village, but the rest just part of the old trade road. There are orchards in Larjung.

We arrive in Tukuche, elevation 8,500 feet. It is much cooler here as camp is pitched in front of some sort of public buildings resembling a school.

We never travel in a tight bunch and at times it seems that we string out over quite a distance. But actually, I am seldom at the front when, if we stop to rest, the whole group is together in five or ten minutes, which was our usual stop. Sometimes by the end of the day, we may be slightly farther apart except for the most difficult days when the distance could stretch up to an hour. But on this particular day, a negative fact of these distances surfaces. Those who have been taking a more casual approach to the trek and arriving towards the end of the pack find they are left with the smaller tent. So an agreement is reached that the three-man tent will be rotated among the "couples." This new agreement is fair.

A description of our sleeping arrangements: there is an unequal allocation of living space. Rick and Celia have their own tent. Ron also had his own that he brought and the porters are carrying. Now, just how fair is this? The equipment supplied by Urgen for the rest of us include the following: there are three "single" tents (actually classified as "two-man") Nancy G, as the only unattached female, has a tent to herself. For some reason there are two more singly occupied tents: Gerry and Jay. Linus and I share a tent and all the rest are couples by design. (Not that Linus and I are not perfect for each other). Of the seven tents for "couples," six are rated as four-man and one as three-man. Now with two people and two mule bags, two day packs and two pair of dirty stinky hiking boots, the four-man is just adequate for two people. The three-man is a bit of a squeeze. Linus and I first had the three-man at Ghorapani by chance and from then on, we have looked for one of the larger ones.

A tractor drives by and someone tells us it was flown here in pieces and assembled. We all chuckle at the driver wearing a crash helmet pulling kids in a trailer. Another group of children gathers and Sandy brings out her Polaroid camera. It is a great hit but of course every child wants his own picture. One father comes and takes his son from the group, not in favor of the exploitation of his children. We do get a good group shot of all the kids. The children here are very inquisitive/persistent. They find something very interesting in our tent, or perhaps it is the experience of peering into our tent that is interesting. It was a long day, not overly strenuous but just a very long day. It is cooler

here and the kids right now are just an extra effort. A number of us are much more concerned with the setting up of the toilet tents than the local culture.

I'll diverge here to comment about one of the more basic of our daily functions. Early in the preparations for this trek we were all aware from our own international travels and from points impressed upon us during meetings with Rick that the greatest danger to the success of our trip was probably not altitude related, not the danger of falling off cliffs, but the real danger of becoming ill. This "ill" was not the danger of being bitten (or torn to shreds) by rabid mastiffs, not the risk of contracting malaria, not pneumonia or other diseases (anything that might force us into Nepalese "health facilities" would most likely be life threatening in itself), but it was the danger of fighting a battle with intestinal organisms and losing. Many of us were armed with prescriptions of Cipro or relied on Rick's medicine bag, as well as supplies of Imodium, Lomotil or such other corking devices. The ultimate disaster would be dysentery, but all sorts of intermediate intestinal dysfunctions could inconvenience or even disable us and possibly delay the trip. With this in the back of everyone's mind, it magnified the natural variations/adjustments our bodies we're making to new diets and schedules.

Now, the little blue tents. When we camp in places that are without toilet facilities, the staff digs two narrow trenches with an ice ax and erects a tent over each that resembles a free standing shower stall. The procedure is to approach the tents when the need arises and if the zippered opening is unzipped, enter, sit upon the portable toilet seat precariously straddling the trench and let nature take its course. If the zippers are zipped, one must wait for the tenants to evacuate first themselves and then the tent. The trenches were made deeper after the first few days at our urging. It seems the staff has no first hand experience of the conditions we experience inside these tents, preferring to find their own facilities elsewhere.

The blue tents are still a step above the facilities that are presented as "restrooms" throughout most of our journey. The most common toilets are large keyhole shaped holes in the floor, or sometimes on slightly raised platforms, frequently with denoted areas for placing the feet, over which one squats, aims and fires. A bucket of water with a cup stands next to the "toilet" with which one can create a flushing action. A basket situated nearby is for used toilet paper as disposal in the hole causes clogging and subsequent backups, a situation with which we are frequently confronted. It was the first or second day on the trail that Laurie initiated a one to ten ranking system of the facilities we encountered.

So here we are in Tukucho, Sunday evening, our fifth trekking day. This is the coldest evening so far, and we are all bundled as we head across the square to dinner on the ground floor of someone's house where we huddle on our little stools. There is an open courtyard with animals standing near our kitchen staff who are busy scrubbing pots and pans. Jim says it looks like the Christ Child might have been born in the corner where we have our dinner. Marge reads a passage about tomorrow's trek from Xerox pages of Lonely Planet's "Trekking in Nepal" that she thoughtfully brought. When we return to our tents, which we do immediately after dinner, the animals of the house take our place

for the night. This was the common style of combining "barn" and living quarters, animals on the first floor, two legged residents above.

Bob and Joyce had found papers somewhere along the trail so tonight we try a little Mustang Mistletoe. In the wee hours many of us are awakened by the sound of a rock slide nearby, a scary reminder of how precariously the villages we have been traveling through in the Kali Gandaki valley are situated beneath the often crumbly conglomerate walls of the mountains.

Monday, October 26 Tukuche to Kagbeni

The morning is chilly and as we pack in preparation for the day, our eyes search for signs of the slide but thoughts turn to the beauty of our surroundings. There is fresh snow on the huge slab-sided peak to our south. Slightly northeast we gaze at Nilgiri with a hanging glacier snaking down through an "S" shaped valley on its side. The snow here is no more than 2,000 feet above us.

Linus pulls out his travel kit of surgical sutures, scalpels and stitches and operates on a blister on Jim's foot; John and Jay assist (with advice and helpful comments). Gerry provides a dressing called second skin. Nicole will ride today because of tendon problem.

There is phone service available in the morning in a small room at the front of the public building we are camped near and Linus and John call home. (Linus forgot Bonnie was visiting Jess so he can only leave a message on the answering machine). Nobody calling home remembers to ask who won the World Series, the Padres or the Yankees.

Late start, up at 6:00 a.m. and not on the trail until 8:00. This area begins to look somewhat like western U.S. We are back to the river and Anema says we will follow it all day, no up and down. Anema is quite a story. He is fifty-five but looks to be well over sixty-five. He has a very impressive mountain climbing resume, part of which includes five Everest expeditions. Never summiting, he made South Peak twice, but as a Sherpa, his role was to assist. It seems to us that someone should have thought enough to give him the nod to go for the top.

Back to the trail. We go through Marpha where we encounter Tibetan refugees with their "wares" spread beside the road.

I find a woman spinning and indicate I want to trade for her spindle. Amazed that I would be more interested in a simple old stick than the crafts of the Tibetan plateau, she agrees to sell it to me for 250 rupees (\$3.50). She is not interested in trading for the wool I have been carrying saying simply that is not what they use. Later I bargain for a yak-bone prayer wheel, some beads, and a bracelet. Linus does some trading for, among other things, a clothespin. They are very interested in the socks I have drying on my pack which earns me the nickname of "many socks" from one group of women.

We arrive in Jomsom/Jomosom (most villages have more than one spelling and pronunciation). Lunch is in a hotel/restaurant in Jomsom and after, while Urgen remains to finalize the permits and meet with the liaison officer we will need for Mustang, we head up the river.

It is two and a half hours to Kagbeni. We start out in the river bed and have our first experience of the wind and dust we have heard about. From around 11:00 until evening, the vectors of heat and rising air along the entire length and depth of the Kali Gandaki create winds that raise dust from the wide sprawling riverbed at the higher elevations. The wind here is at our backs and while some of us pull on facemasks, all travelers coming south are masked and bundled against the wind and dust.

Jim and Laurie lead us into Kagbeni where we are directed to an upstairs room to await the arrival of the mules with our tents. Of course, Jay discovers a source (downstairs) of cool beer and we open a bottle of apple brandy Linus bought this afternoon (the area we came through below Jomsom is known for its apple orchards and the production of apple brandy we discover why it is primarily of local notoriety). There is a beautiful Tibetan woman weaving on a wooden loom, but she will not allow us to take her picture. After tents are set up, Sandy and Marge go with Urgen to find FAX facility to "phone home." I follow and wander about inspecting hotel facilities, finally deciding on one just up the street where I take a wonderfully hot shower on the second floor with a window looking down the valley at Nilgiri's three peaks. (We are now north of Nilgiri.) If it were not for the toilet hole sharing the room with the shower, I would have been tempted to stay longer. Others found another hotel with shower that produced a better flow of water from a spigot on the wall under the showerhead.

After the tents are set up we gather in our tent for Scotch and brandy; and John and Gerry discover themselves at their first pot party. Later Henry comments that our words to the Wiffenpoof song were not entirely correct. Joyce's voice is gone. Linus is beginning to suffer early stages of cough. Jed, John, Susan and Gerry entertain at dinner with "Strolling Through the Park." After dinner a woman offers knitted and woven articles for sale then takes me into a back room where she offers me old tankas for sale. Bob and Joyce's tent is positioned directly in front of outhouse (noisy, not happy).

Tuesday, October 27 Kagbeni to Chele

After breakfast I buy a weaving from the older woman and she allows me to take a picture of her at the loom. John administers to an old woman with skin problems and Urgen suggests he refrains or he will have the entire village lined up. This attitude of what is, is and what will be will be is repeated often during the trip.

We walk through Kagbeni and wait to register before we are allowed up the trail into northern Mustang. The trail goes up and down beside the river then about a quarter mile in the riverbed. Susan, AJ and Jim find fossil nodules called saligrams, 100,000,000 years old. The old trail was destroyed by landslides so we head up and over a high plateau. There is some grumbling that the porters seem to be following the more gradual riverbed

far below our route. The plateau is at 10,000 feet, barren with sparse low thorny bushes. Snow-capped peaks are behind, to left and ahead of us but we are walking through a high desert. Jim is doing okay with his blister. Marge is pretty tired. I am wearing wind pants and long sleeve shirt for first time, and also glacier glasses and headscarf as much to cover from too much sun as to protect against wind and dust. Wind begins about 10:45 a.m.

Tangbe for lunch in courtyard with drying cornstalks and beautiful, but dirty, Tibetan featured kids. Some of us lie in the cornstalks, looking up at the Tibetan children who stand silently gazing down on us. The common greeting has changed among the local population from the Namaste of Nepal to the Tashi Deleg of Tibet. A few of our group take little or no lunch. It's difficult for some to eat hot food washed down with hot drink after walking for hours. Perhaps the elevation is having some effect. Joyce draws our attention to a sheep being slaughtered above us and we note our staff and porters taking portions.

The trail stays beside or on the river until we climb up to Chele. The surroundings are dry and dusty. When we look up or down the riverbed, the dust in the distance looks like a thin haze of smoke. I realize that it is not just in the distance but that we are walking through it constantly, it is just too fine to see when we are in its midst.

We passed no one on the trail this morning. We are definitely off the tourist route here. Also, until today our olfactory senses were constantly reminded that we shared the trail with many animals and humans and our eyes were on the trail not only to guide us forward but also around the evidence of the numerous creatures. Today we are past that.

Camp at Chele. The last stretch was steep up the hill to town after crossing the river on well-constructed metal bridges where the river flowed through a square topped tunnel that appeared carved by man, not nature. There were caves in the red cliff on the east side of the river at the final crossing. The wind gusts were blowing so hard on the switchbacks up the hill that the porter carrying our mess tent had to be supported by the one behind him or he would have been blown over. We camp in tiered courtyards. Mess tent is up and we have pepperoni and cheese at teatime. Celia was our provider of these familiar goodies. She supplied Snickers for snacks and Fig Newtons for dessert. Once she came up with a complete canned ham. All this lugged over from Boston (and carried by our unsuspecting mules). Also, she and Rick could always be counted on to dispense any medicine to cure any of our ills. Jay and Nancy G make a beer run. The blue tents are pitched right in front of an irrigation stream. The sound of running water is pleasant.

Today I started carrying my little canister of pepper spray on a strap of my pack. The guidebooks warn of Tibetan mastiffs that are "pets" kept chained during the day and left to roam at night. If faced with one, the advice is to throw rocks, yell and await the owner to call off the beast.

We discuss tips: Rick says he thinks it should be about \$30 per person to be divided among Sherpa and cook staff. Donated clothes and equipment will also be distributed at

that time. The porters are not included in the group's tip. I have been giving Jum-Ling food bars or candy every morning and resolve to take care somehow at our return to Jomsom.

We are at 10,000 feet and I think a number of us are feeling a bit "different." Nobody is talking about it (including Rick).

I guess the theory is to just watch and see how everyone is doing. After all, none of us have gone into this without either experience or research about the effects of altitude. I am pretty certain that is the main reason for the lack of great concern

(I know for certain these people have been over 10,000 before: Linus, John, Rick, Celia, AJ, Henry, Nancy H, Nancy G, Jay, Ron, Bob and myself. That is twelve for sure there are probably others). Rick has brought a Gamoff bag that, as I understand, is a mini decompression chamber that would be used to carry an altitude stricken trekker to a lower level in an emergency. Having read up on the causes and effects of pulmonary and cerebral edema, I have a respect for this piece of equipment and Rick for his planning. However, on a day-to-day basis I am more sympathetic for the lead Sherpa whose responsibility it is to carry it in its red bag. (I hope Gerry doesn't succumb to one of these afflictions because by the time we catch up to him it will probably be too late to save him.)

At 5:45 p.m. we are in the tents, everyone is napping before dinner. The wind stopped by 6:00. There are a few people in the paddock next to us threshing beans with long-handled flails.

Lamb for dinner: curry with rice and lentils, very good. It is much cooler tonight. I wear a fleece jacket to dinner. Urgen introduces our liaison officer who will accompany us through Mustang to assure we do not pollute the local culture, steal or desecrate religious icons, or report if we defect to China.

Mustang was opened to foreigners in 1992 and through 1997 the limit of 1,000 permits per year has not been reached. There have never been more than three hundred Americans in any year; more French and Germans visit the area. These observations are from looking at the visa records in Kagbeni. This means we are probably among no more than a thousand Americans (other than unrecorded CIA personnel in the seventies and eighties) to have ever seen the upper Mustang region.

This is a cozy camp; too bad we cannot spend more time looking at the incredible display of stars. We're all asleep minutes after dinner.

Wednesday, October 28 Chele to Geling



Breakfast of granola, eggs and pancakes. Marge, Sandy, Nancy, and Jim begin on horses that Urgen has provided. We leave at 7:30 a.m. and by 9:00 are at 11,000 feet and

at 9:30 at 11,500 feet. Immediately after leaving Chele, we begin a steady uphill climb that becomes steeper and narrower with an ever widening and deepening canyon to our left. At times the trail is single file width and at least once we pass over a section that had been replaced after a slide with a reconstructed span that is impossible to see underneath without climbing down the precipitous edge. I wonder how often it is inspected? Across the canyon we are passing a large village with miles of walls protecting their terraced lands. All water we come upon within a mile or so of any village is directed through man-made channels. The day continues with the most up and down hiking we have yet encountered and we are doing it all well above 10,000 feet.

The town of Samar has aspen-like trees in fall colors. The only green we see since travelling above Jomsom is in areas near water channels. To the east and south the mountains are spectacular to the west they are high but not snow capped.

No one seems to know their names and those who do, know only the Nepalese/Tibetan names.

We go over a 12,500 foot pass then drop to 12,300 feet for lunch at an isolated dwelling/teahouse where two men are slaughtering a goat in the small area between the building and the trail. They have Chinese beer for sale, an indication of our approach toward the Tibetan border and a change in the source of nearest lines of supply. I pretty much skip lunch feeling a little off color.

After lunch we have two more up and down passes and gorges and then a 13,000-foot pass. I recognize that I must consciously breath deeper to keep from getting out of breath. The only traffic we see is Tibetans heading south. A few tell us they are headed for India (Basra?). The first of us arrive at the campsite at 4:00, a compound outside, to the southwest of Geling. We are well ahead of the porters and after the donkeys arrive and are unloaded, Urgan sends a couple of them back to help them. It is cold and I will remember from now on to carry my down sweater and wool hat in my pack.

This was certainly our toughest day (although the Ghorepani-Tatopani day is still in the running). The first two days of our trek we went steadily uphill. The third day there was the hike up Poon Hill then down, down, down (and an agonizing up when we should have "been there"), days four, five, six and seven were basically a steady progression up the Kali Gandaki valley. But today we left the valley to our east and traversed a number of ridges and valleys. The slopes were consistently greater than we had been hiking and we went for a full eight hours.

I make a couple of trips to blue tents. It feels more like something I ate than altitude reaction, but whatever it is, I am not enjoying the evening and have little more than soup for dinner.

Laurie buys a blanket set, and not just any blanket. This isn't some cheap imitation made-for-the-tourists horse blanket. This is the genuine article a really-been-used saddle blanket smelling of horse sweat.

We are sleeping above 12,000 feet. It is a long night. Bob in nearby tent and Linus in with me are coughing regularly (others also heard down the line). I am tossing and turning in zipped-up sleeping bag.

Thursday, October 29 Geling to Tsarang

The morning comes with frost. At breakfast I manage hot cereal and toast. Jim has to unzip his mule bag and take out the horse blankets he purchased yesterday. It seems that our horseman needs the blanket for the rest of the trek. Jim and Laurie will have to take possession of their goods in Jomsom.

This day starts off with a long uphill pass just shy of 13,000 feet, then a long stretch around and down to Ghami for lunch. We eat upstairs in a room furnished more ornately than we have yet seen with painted and lacquered chests and colorful scroll-worked cabinets. Even the support columns are ornately carved. There is a big prayer wheel at the top of the stairs. A woman offers trinkets and tankas in a side room. Men making goat sausage on the roof make most appreciate the fare provided by our Sherpa staff. I am feeling a bit better but have little more than a couple cinnamon rolls for lunch.

After lunch we dip down by a stream, up the farther side and pass the longest Mani wall in Nepal. Then we continue up a long incline to 12,300 feet and a long sloping descent to Tsarang. I comment that as far as the landscape is concerned, we could have stayed in the U.S., flown to Phoenix and be seeing the same landscape from the luxury of an air-conditioned car. When we reach Tsarang. I fell great, whatever it was has departed.

We are seeing yaks and dzos now. Dzos are an infertile cross between yaks and cattle. (Female yak is a nok ergo yak cheese is a misnomer but who wants to eat nok cheese). Linus says yaks are skittish and more difficult to control. How he knows this is beyond me. I should be hearing this from John, but he says he hardly ever sees yaks in Winthrop since they cannot live below 8,000 feet.

Chanting and horn-blowing is heard as we enter the city and after the tents are set up, a number go off to visit the monastery. They are treated to a tour of the Dorgee Dhen Ghompa, for 100 rupees apiece, with chanting and drumming lamas and a stuffed snow leopard. Then they are led to the ruins of the old ghompa where picture taking is allowed. Here original frescoes can still be seen on the walls, but the most interesting sight is the lama guiding the tour wearing a burgundy down vest, smoke-soiled burgundy robes and a matching Washington Redskins cap. Before returning, the group is shown the old palace featuring ancient Tibetan armor and a mummified severed hand, reportedly of the palace's builder.

Only Chinese beer is available here and I decide it is not one of my favorites, a bit too tangy and foamy. Nancy G and I wash at a nearby stand pipe and meet a Frenchman who seems to indicate Lo Manthang is four hours away along a difficult trail. He speaks no English and he and Nancy G finally communicate in some very spotty Spanish. Talk at

dinner is how to get a full "rest" day in Lo and make it back to Jomsom in three days. Seems we will use horses. I am not looking forward to that.

Linus and I hear a low deep growl directly behind our tent at night. I grab the pepper spray and we both speak with affirmative tones to our visitor. Hear it about a half hour later and same tactics bring us through the night without fang marks. In the morning I discover paw prints on a T-shirt that had fallen beside the tent.

Friday, October 30 Tsarang to Lo Manthang

Our Destination

Frost again last night. It was generally a much better night less coughing (or maybe I just slept better) and everyone seems in good spirits in anticipation of arriving in Lo early.

After a moderate start, it is fairly easy the rest of the way and we arrive outside Lo Manthang in 4½ hours. Shortly after we began this morning we passed the Frenchman we got information from yesterday. It seems the language barrier caused a misunderstanding of tenses. He was saying "will be" rather than "is".

Rick and John explored some caves cut out of the cliff walls close to the trail. We have seen these man-made caves high up on a number of the hillsides. They reported bird droppings but no wall paintings, pottery shards or bones.

Here we are in the capital of Upper Mustang! The horses made it first today so Marge and Sandy greet us as we climb up to the city. We camp in a compound where traders are already spreading their wares. The "horseman" bought a case of Chinese beer and sodas and is selling them for 100R/bottle. We mill around as tents are set up and after brief rest, Gerry, Bob, Joyce and I go into town with a friendly trader with good English as our a guide. We pass a young girl, less than ten, gathering horse manure in a traditional cone shape basket. She passes us with full basket and spills it just inside the gate (see picture).



The walls of the city were built in the 14th century. It is the only walled city in Lo and the people are proud of that. However, houses built in more recent times around the outside of the walls have made entrances that have corrupted the integrity of the original fortress. What should be the only gate, the "King's Gate" is on the northeast side of the city where we see two huge copper prayer wheels. We have a brief tour of the city and see two sets of large chortens, the king's palace (not terribly impressive) and wander through short narrow streets. Dung is drying on shelves and packed into corners in doorways, There are many children, some women, fewer

men and no teens or twenties.

Then we are led to our trader's house/shop. He is the youngest son and so has the duty of remaining with his mother and father. His brothers and sisters are "gone" and we are not able to determine whether they return with the seasons or have moved on to more prosperous places. There is one sister still living at home when we visit. The father makes ceremonial masks that we are shown, and offered for sale, and there are carpets from Tibet. His mother is a knitter and a weaver and I make a deal for another spindle for Cyndie. It turns out to be identical to the one I purchased in Marpha. Gerry, Bob and I purchase the colorfully woven striped wraps seen on Tibetan women and are instructed in the method of wearing them according to age and marital status.

Gerry has his 55th birthday and cake cooked by Sherpa staff. (Urgen figured it out from dates on passports I think). To bed at 8:30 p.m. Our first rest day tomorrow!

Saturday, October 31 Rest day at Lo

Up at 6:30 am. I woke up frequently at night. I think it was the altitude. No dogs barking in Lo. Still a lot of coughing through the camp, but all enjoyed the luxury of sleeping in.

We tour the town led by Urgen and accompanied by "our trader," the "horse guy" and a number of our Sherpa staff. The first monastery we visit is huge, Thubehnen Ghompa. We all pay an entry fee of 100R. No pictures are allowed inside the monasteries (to keep information of the religious treasures from attracting thieves).

There are four statues or "protectors" in the foyer. Inside gigantic columns support a thirty-foot high ceiling with a center opening in the roof guarded by lion figures. Around the center altar are bowl lamps filled with yak oil and floating wicks. Statues of multiple deities are all along the altar. A monk is chanting when we enter, stopping only briefly to acknowledge us, although he does respond to questions from our Sherpa staff, most of whom genuflect and do their religious bowing and scraping (and leave their offering in a bowl of grain that had already been seeded with bills). The trader who has apparently adopted us (and is well educated, speaking some of the better English we have encountered) is very helpful giving us information about the monastery. Urgen also offers information about the mystical aspects we have questions about. I am surprised at the number and types of Gods in evidence on and behind the altar. Tibetan Buddhism is far more complicated than venerating and trying to attain the enlightenment of Gotama under the pipal tree.

The monastery is undergoing extensive and much needed renovations, obviously the result of extreme neglect over the past centuries. There is a huge Buddha behind a plastic tarp suspended for the renovations being done, slowly by the looks of things. Sue walks about softly taping her impressions into a hand-held recorder and trying to capture a sound bite from the seated lama who is more interested in looking at us than being recorded for posterity.

Next is a monastery and school. This is smaller but seems more used, certainly better furnished. The first was a cavernous affair with massive timber columns, this has a lower ceiling and probably is used daily by the young students. We are allowed to take pictures in the classroom building next door which seems as ornate and full of artifacts as the monastery itself.

Then Urgen takes us up onto a nearby roof and we take pictures of the city. Ron wants to see the king's dogs. Linus has his pepper spray clutched to his chest. When we find them, they certainly are not mastiffs and not frightening in their demeanor. The King is not in residence but still at his summer palace, so he may have taken his ferocious dogs with him. We have heard the mastiffs are kept chained during the day and allowed to roam free at night protecting the monastery from intruders. Supposedly they will bite anyone not wearing the burgundy robes of a lama. Urgen then leads us to the third monastery, but as we enter (on the second level), most of us immediately exit as this is simply another large, dark, dusty temple and we have had enough. Having crossed the portal however, is enough to require the 100R fee, so we pay and go on our way.

Some of us stop at the school where we purchase Mustang T-shirts and then most head back to camp for rest and lunch. I go with our trusty trader to get a spindle he had promised me. Then as he leads me back, we encounter Nancy G wandering through the alleyways of Lo. She joins us and we are led through an exit carved out of the old city walls just next to our camp.

The city is generally pretty dirty. My impressions are of narrow alleys most not well-maintained, dung drying in doorways, more in the street underfoot, dirty children and roaming cows and donkeys. I make the observation that it appears the culture venerates age to such an extent that nothing is changed. This extends to the daily maintenance of the surroundings. I cannot account for stones scattered about in the courtyards of the monasteries; it would take little effort to clear them away. The area is dry and dusty, but still the monasteries have not seen a dust rag since the first Buddha. Whether the majority of the population is, as the king, still at their summer digs or has headed south for the winter, the city is fairly empty. The atmosphere is less than that of a vibrant culture maintaining Tibetan Buddhism for the future of a free Tibet.

During the afternoon pretty much everyone rested. Celia held a clinic. Jim presented Ron with a water bottle he had painted with a caricature of Ron wearing his POW-MIA "do" rag.

Dinner is relaxed. It is Halloween! Linus has the only costume. Nancy G has candy corn a bit the worse for the trek. Neither would bring awards or cries of delight in other circumstances, but tonight they are much appreciated.

Sunday, November 1 Lo to Ghami

We start back to Jomsom

Tea at 5:00 a.m. The ritual "Excuse me! Good morning!" wake-up litany with its option of black tea or milk tea and biscuit has another three days to go. It is very cold this morning and we all bundle into the mess tent for breakfast of gruel, pancakes and omelets. We are all packed and ready for the horses at 7:00. The plan is to ride which should get us back faster because we must travel in three days what took almost four and a half on the way up. So here we are all waiting for the horses that were to be here at 7:00. We are cold; the gear is all ready for the donkeys. The traders start arriving for a last go at our dollars and rupees. Nancy G buys a carpet. Laurie cannot resist another bell (she already has one for every member of the family, to be worn according to their age and rank). Henry goes for a tanka. It is now 7:30 and a few of us warm our vocal chords with some western tunes. 7:45 and Urgen leaves to go find the horses, returning with the information that they are feeding. 8:00 a.m. creeps up and still no horses. At 8:30 we start walking and stop in the draw at the edge of the city. "Our trader" chases Gerry, who finally makes an impressive deal for a strand of Om Mani beads. Lo has awakened a repressed urge from the sixties in Gerry and he wears the beads for the remainder of the trip.

At 8:40 I start walking with Gerry and Ron. Jay and Linus apparently headed out with two lead Sherpas at 8:00. Ron drops back at the hill up to the pass at the approach to Lo Manthang. Gerry and I truck on down the road and catch up to JKZ, one of our Sherpas, near the caves about half way to Tsarang and eventually overtake Jay, Linus and Nuong Sherpa at the pass just before Tsarang. We skirt the village and are at the chorten on the southern edge of Tsarang by 11:30 thus finishing before noon the distance we covered on our last day going up. We make it into Ghami at 2:30 having spent almost ½ hour at the pass above the long Mani wall. The rest of the group starts arriving about 3:30.

Tents are set up in a courtyard where a woman is steaming barley and spreading it to dry. We watch for the rest of the party from the roof of the shed. Linus and I make a paper plane and figures for a couple of kids and are having fun until Urgen arrives and shoos them away.

We eat in a room on the second floor with the intricately detailed furnishings where we had lunch on the trip up. We eat with the benefit of a small fluorescent light powered by batteries charged by solar panels. Dinner is sheep chunks in gravy, mashies, rice, peas and tomato sauce. After dinner, we are entertained by five women who offered to demonstrate their local dancing. They are joined by Anema and Concha who have been at the local shabeen partaking of chang.

There is no space for the blue tents in our compound, which causes some concern, but we are informed we can use the hotel all night. Linus and I take a Lomotal to avoid the necessity.

It is cold and clear with a 2/3 moon that Linus and I enjoy as we pee in the nearby alley late that night. I carried my pepper spray when we exited the tent, but it seems the dogs of choice in Ghami are Lhasa Apsos whose annoying yippy barking continues long after

dark. John had brought earplugs he passed out at Logan to block out annoying nighttime noises. Those who remembered to use them slept the soundest.

Since we have been north of Jomsom, the sky has been cloudless. The blues during the day vary according to the position of the sun and the direction we are looking. And at night, it is only the cold and exhaustion that keeps us from spending more time enjoying the starry sky. Birds are the only travelers in the otherwise unoccupied sky (with the large lammergeier vultures dominating) as planes are certainly restricted in this region so close to Tibet/China.

Monday, November 2 Ghami to Chele

We are up again early. There is ice on standing water and along the edges of watercourses. Today the horses are already in residence. Nineteen of us start out on horses with Ron walking. Laurie and Sue are off the horses without packs at some point.

I ride from 8:00 a.m. to 9:30 over the first two passes then walk an hour, reaching Geling (where we camped on the way up) at 10:30. Hot lunch is being prepared but a few of us would rather get farther along on what is to be a very long day (we have to reach Chele back over terrain that had been the most difficult day coming north). Gerry, Linus, Ron, Jay, Nancy G and I are all ready to go but Jay and Nancy G are lured by the prospect of French fries and remain for lunch.

The four of us set out with supplies of trail snacks. After a few passes Ron is dragging a bit on the up-hills. (He had walked the entire morning while we rode horses for 1½ hours.) We rest and have a coke (for 55R=\$.80) at the lunch spot of the way north where the two men had been slaughtering a goat. Then on the next pass we move ahead of Ron and make an unspoken agreement to move on. It is interesting that this is the only time I remember on the trek that I consider passing someone on the trail as "leaving" them.

Linus, Gerry and I chug on.

At one point just before the final descent into Chele, Linus, apparently suffering from exposure to the sun, charges off at a pace that would certainly kill us all if we had not eventually been able to rein him in.

Then on the way down with a gaping chasm to our right we see a group of dzos heading up toward us. Racing for safety, we reach the shelter of a large boulder to keep from being forced into the abyss. Ron later reported that he encountered a dzo that would not give way until he threatened to impale it with his trekking pole.

Chele is hidden by a shelf that is the shoulder of the mountain to its northwest. So as we descend through this arid landscape, the anticipation of arrival is confused by the absence of any indication that the village will soon appear in this barren environment, conflicting recollections of the recent climb up this same trail, and our own exhaustion. Considering

that downhill is my favored method of hiking, to admit to this mental and physical condition is a definite indication of the difficulty of this day's trek.

Eventually we pull into Chele at 3:30 after this precarious downhill section that seemed even longer than the grueling ascent only five days ago.

Just above the village I pull aside to make a quick change from sweaty T-shirt and shorts into a "fresh" T-shirt and my wind pants. The wind pants represent a multiple of motives: first, the clothes I am wearing are drenched with sweat from exertion on this long day; second, entering Chele and anticipating interaction with the local population, it is more appropriate to be wearing long pants; and third, these nylon pants were the only long pant option I carried during the day.

We exhaustedly stumble into a hotel where we sit together and enjoy a cold beer. Purchasing a second refreshing brew we head out to find the campsite. As soon as we enter the street, there are Jay and Ron. Having arrived in the town, going directly to campsite and not finding the three of us there, they returned to the center of town and were just then in the process of deciding which bar to enter first in their search for us. The five of us wind through the streets to our tiered campsite where the Sherpa staff has now arrived and is setting up the tents. I wait for the cooks to get settled and get a pan of hot water to wash the grime of the day from my weary body.

This day on the way north was the most physically demanding. Now on the way down it is a close second and certainly the longest day in distance covered.

Joyce has her voice back!

Tuesday, November 3 Chele to Jomsom

Last trekking day! Up at 5:30 a.m. Start hiking at 8:00 down to the river and out across the riverbed. We are temporarily halted when the channel comes into the eastern bank but Linus,

Nancy G and I find a route across the farm terraces of a town and proceed ahead of those awaiting the arrival of the horses to ford the river. Soon we are forced by the meandering river channel, to take to an up and down side trail along the east side of the riverbed. We are led by Karne Sherpa and he finds a fossil for me. The trail is tiring especially since we were psychologically prepared to be on the riverbed all the way to Kagbeni. So when the trail returns to the river Nancy G halts to wait for the horses. Linus and I continue a little further where the river channel stops us about 10:00. When the horses arrive at about 10:30, we hear of a horse collision where Nancy H and Celia were spilled. A stern talk with the horsemen who were using their sticks too freely to prod the horses tempered their enthusiasm somewhat.

After three shallow crossings, we enter Kagbeni at 11:45 and have a pleasant bag lunch in the upstairs room of a hotel. After lunch Linus, Nancy G and I head out into the wind for

Jomsom. Before we leave the village I am almost gored by a dzo that comes from behind me. We make Jomsom in two hours. Gerry catches and passes us, Jay joins us just before town, and the five of us celebrate the end of our trek with Tuborg in the front of the Marco Polo Hotel. We are soon joined by AJ and Nicole. Gradually the entire troupe arrives on horseback wearing an assortment of creative headgear, glasses and masks. We settle into rooms with beds, some with private baths, spartan accommodations but luxurious compared to the last two weeks in tents.

A few gather in the low-rent triple shared by Gerry, Linus and me. Bob and Joyce stop by and we agree to save our weed for a farewell puff in Kathmandu. Jim drops in and we share the last of Gerry's Dewars and a sip or two of Jim's Meyers. Nancy G visits briefly and leaves when she discovers an upgrade in rooms will provide private shower facilities. Nicole and AJ stop by briefly and the afternoon proceeds into evening. We relax, shower, and sort gear, putting aside anything we will leave behind for the "staff" both as additional tip and to lighten our packs which are to be limited to thirty-five pounds for the flight to Pokhara (a task that would ultimately prove impossible for some who had purchased treasures that could not be abandoned).

When we assemble in the "dining" room later, Urgen sorts all the discarded gear into sixteen piles. T-shirts, socks, light articles of clothing and small gear predominate, but it is a pair of boots and sneakers that are given a value that leaves them in piles with almost no other items. Two ground mats follow a close second with only a few items added to those piles. The staff enters and the tip money (\$50 from each of us- \$950 total) that had been collected earlier is distributed in envelopes. Ritzi, the cook receives the largest tip and amounts vary (we were not privy to the specific sums) according to the importance of the position as determined by Urgen. When each receives his tip he also picks a scrap of paper at random, its number indicating which corresponding pile of gear is his additional bounty. This gives some chance that a less senior member could receive a "superior" gear allotment. The procedure is just a bit bizarre as we watch our unwanted, and often unclean clothing gathered as a reward by these Nepalese who have served us so well over the past weeks.

As I mentioned before, the seven porters were not included in any of these proceedings. I give my porter a T-shirt, my sneakers and \$20. Only a couple of others receive anything. The next morning I see my sneakers on another of the porters and assume Jum-Ling made a successful trade. Ron mentioned that after the distribution of gear there would be much trading fueled by chang.

At dinner Jim gives Trek Awards. We have veggie fritters (one of our favorites right up there with mashed potatoes and French fries), ham, pineapple, rice, potato-veggie mix and for dessert chocolate cake. All this is illuminated by the most electricity we have had during our trek.

Wednesday, November 4 Jomson

to Pokhara to Kathmandu

In the morning, we are up early and mule bags are delivered across the street to the airport. Final shots are taken of Sherpa friends we will most probably never see again. Nilgiri stands directly behind the airstrip and we watch the sun rise over its ridge bringing immediate relief to the chilly air.

The Twin Otters that seem to be the only plane used by the three airlines servicing Pokhara begin to arrive about nine. The group for the first plane heads into the terminal. All our mule bags are taken and weighed. Urgen will complain later that we were 100 pounds overweight and it cost him \$100.

Linus, Gerry, Sandy, Marge, AJ, Nicole, Ron and I are on Lumbini Airline's second flight. At the Xanadu Hotel, across from the Marco Polo, we breakfast on huge brownies and fresh brewed coffee. The flight takes about twenty minutes so we soon wander to the terminal and enter the waiting room. A couple of us almost have our pocket knives confiscated as dangerous weapons by the airport guards. Early arrival is a mistake, as the air is oppressive to say the least. The toilet rating puts this one at the bottom of the scale, a real stinker.

But the plane arrives and we are soon airborne travelling in twenty minutes down the section of the Kali Ghandaki gorge that we spent five days working our way up. We look down on Poon Hill, bathed in early morning sunlight and wonder how many months ago we sweated up that hill into the clouds.

When we land in Pokhara, one of the first orders of business is to change from the clothes we dressed in that morning to ward off the effects of frost and get into shorts more befitting the tropical heat we find here. We join the rest of the group for breakfast on the top floor of the Tibet Guesthouse (except for Henry and Nancy H who have breakfasted at a hotel more to their liking). There had been a few who considered flying from Pokhara to Kathmandu, but in the end all take the bus together leaving at 11:00 a.m. Nancy is pissed at Rick for some reason thinking we had left without them. Ron can't stop talking about the stall warning that sounded as our plane landed. He had all along said that the planes would probably be sound but it was the third world pilots who were the weak link. Good thing they were not too weak.

On the road back to Kathmandu, the bus is roomier than the one on the way out and the driver does not have the same suicidal style.

What a tremendous diversity of geography and humanity we have been exposed to on this trip. Here Nepal again reminds me of our experience in East Africa twenty-five years ago. The mixture of man, animal, agriculture and basic trades merging together all with the immense Himalayan background holds my attention, keeping me from dozing in the bus. This has been such a brief encounter with a country and its culture. I will have to be content with my comprehension from the impressions I have from our eighteen days here. We have been treated to the spectacular scenery of Nepal and been transient observers of the cultures we encountered. When Jim called me last March, the prospect of hiking in the Himalayas was the reason for coming. As I read about Mustang, our destination, I

became excited about glimpsing the Tibetan culture in addition to the Nepalese and the mountains. But the experience has gone far beyond the naïve excitement with which I prepared for this trip. And in addition we have whipped our bodies into lean mean hiking machines.

Ron's Avocet altitude watch calculated we ascended 90,000 vertical feet. The watch counts every uphill move in this figure (if we went up ten feet then down ten feet, when we regained the altitude we had lost, we would be only ten feet higher than when we originally began, but we would have gone up a total of twenty feet). When I think about the second day with almost no downhill, the third day with a six thousand-foot drop, and the trip out of Mustang (net downhill) I have a problem with this figure, but there it is anyway.

On the trip back to Kathmandu we have a flat tire and are treated to third world ingenuity and entrepreneurial skills. The driver apparently knew one of the double tires on the rear needed fixing and waited until we reached a tire repair shop equipped with a compressor, various tubes, tires (none new) and tools to do the repair. As we leave the bus, careful not to step in the gutter, which was also the local toilet facility, we risked the possibility of being struck by passing vehicles. We snap pictures of the repair and the locals that included a couple of naked kids. . Back in the bus. There is rice everywhere. It is harvest time and many fields have small encampments that must serve as temporary residence for the harvesters. All work is by hand. There is absolutely no mechanization in evidence in the fields.

The Trisuli River is the source of another industry. The riverbed provides the supply of rock that is the raw material for gravel. The gravel is made by people breaking/chipping larger stones with hammers into piles of different gravel sizes. Someone told me there is a minimum wage of three dollars a day?

We arrive on the outskirts of Kathmandu after dark. As night comes on, we watch single bulbs illuminating the cramped dwellings and dinner being prepared on open fires. After traveling slowly through evening traffic, we finally stop and are reminded that the bus will not be allowed into the narrow streets of Thamel where we are staying. Concha leaves the bus and disappears. There is a slight problem with leadership here. We are all tired and ready to get to the hotel. (In fact, I really think we should have been hurried a little in Pokhara just to avoid a late arrival in Kathmandu) We think Concha has gone to make arrangements to get us to the hotel, but think is a key word here as nobody knows what the plan is. Perhaps the hotel has a bus? Someone suggests we hail cabs and go ahead. Celia finally gets up and tries a weak anecdote about a cartoon no one has ever heard of. Eventually we are, in fact, transferred to cabs; not cabs brought back from the hotel but hailed from the ones that have been constantly streaming by us ever since we stopped. Our cabby, however, has no idea where the Hotel Thamel is and we try to follow one of the other cabs. We almost make it. Then after passing within a block three times we pick up a local guy who is ready to take us to the hotel he is affiliated with if we cannot find a room where we are headed.

I room with Jay and after a quick check-in and baggage drop, we head out to dinner on the roof of the "Brezel" restaurant. Most of us have "sizzling steak" and of course the mandatory beer. After dinner Linus, Nancy G, Nicole, AJ and I wander back to the hotel through narrow streets filled with small shops. About a block before the hotel we see a BIG rat running along the cables on the second floor of the buildings. Then, not yet ready for bed, Linus, Nancy G and I go looking for some music. We pass one club and go upstairs into "Sam's" where music of the Doors is playing. A small group of people is there and we run into Jeff Grayson (of Pokhara and Ghasa acquaintance). What are the chances of these three meetings? Nancy G meets

a woman who is contracting with carpet makers to produce her designs. She leaves with her to see her portfolio leaving Linus and I to sip a little Johnnie Walker and talk with Jeff and a British couple with whom he has been for a couple days. His trip has been enjoyably successful and he is leaving the next morning.

Thursday, November 5 Shopping in Kathmandu

Before breakfast, Jay gives me directions around Thamel and

I head off to accumulate trinkets and a carpet. I run into Linus and Gerry and we travel the alleys and byways of Kathmandu. We go through an area of predominantly fresh produce shops then a section of hard goods (there were shops that sold only blue tarps), and a square with a number of religious temples (more than most there are temples and prayer walls everywhere). While we are looking at a particularly interesting old building, a cab passes carrying Sandy, Marge and Nancy G to the Tibetan carpet factory in this sprawling city, the coincidence seems strange. We find a street with numerous carpet shops and I begin my quest. It proceeds poorly and I make no purchase. We do negotiate for three Ghurka knives, find a neat shop with paper products, incense and saffron, and buy some other trinkets. Then we return to "Mike's" for lunch where we find Joyce and Bob at a table upstairs on the outdoor patio.

Meanwhile, another group piled into little taxis and went to the Patan area of town to shop at the factory where Tibetan women weave carpets. Proceeds of their sales go to the Kathmandu Tibetan community. Word is, the community was well served by this group.

We rendezvous with Rick and Celia and take rickshaws across town near the palace past the giant bats sleeping in their trees to visit the "better" jewelry shops. They are very unimpressive with low quality stones and highly variable levels of workmanship. The one thing that is impressive is the extremely low labor cost in the pieces (there are graduated multi gemstone necklaces that are priced no more than the basic cost of the stones).

Back to Thamel for some final shopping then freshen up at the hotel and Concha leads us to a bus and across town on our way to Urgan's for dinner. We are treated to a visit to a huge Buddhist Bodhnath stupa, 2050 years old the largest in Nepal (the Monkey Temple covers a greater area, but this is a larger structure). Urgan explains some of its history and that inside had been placed religious and precious things including gold, diamonds and

ashes. Of course there are more shops and thus more shopping. (Bob and Joyce return the next day to spend more time and probably do even more shopping.)

Then we bus on to Urgan's. He has a five-story building with shops on the ground level, two rented floors, and his residence on the upper two floors and the roof, where we dine on a feast of beer, soda, French fries, rice, chicken curries, pasta and veggies. At last the trekkers are treated to "The One-armed Fiddler" as interpreted by John, a tradition that goes back to our days in the huts. Last dinner good-byes are said and it is a great way to finish our trip, just our group alone on a roof overlooking Kathmandu under a full moon.

When we return to the hotel, the streets are dark and empty not a usual sight in bustling Kathmandu. Bob, Joyce, Marge, Sandy, Nancy G, Jay and I adjourn to my room where we finish the final bud. We critique the trip and gripe about the snafu over tipping Rick et al. Finally the neighbors request a lowering of the volume and the group disperses. Jay and I discover we misplaced some baggies of potentially prisonable material and repack with extreme care before turning in for our final night in Nepal.

Friday, November 6 Kathmandu to Bangkok

After breakfast we have a final hour and a half to spend the remainder of our rupees taking advantage of "morning price" which we all do with ease and haste. Jim had picked up the Trek T-shirt magnificent design and colors that he and Nancy G designed and found a shop to embroider them in one day. I buy prayer flags, a small Buddha, some hemp hats and find a jewelry shop that is significantly better in workmanship than others I have seen. I am outdone by Jim and his shell-encrusted hat and then Ron and his entire hemp ensemble, a cute little brimmed hat with over-the-shoulder handbag. Incredibly, Laurie seems almost shopped out. But it is the Grosses whom I suspect actually won the shopping prize. It just seems they are always off somewhere quietly spending their money.

Bus to the airport. Urgan guides the troupe through the maze of people and officials. Then with a parting gift of prayer shawls from him and Ritzi and hugs all around, we spend the last of our Nepalese currency in the departure lounge restaurant then take the plane to Bangkok. We are now a group of fourteen: Jed, Linus, Gerry, John, Susan, Jim, Laurie, Jay, Ron Joyce, Bob, Nancy, Rick and Celia. Henry and Nancy H are spending a few more days in Nepal then flying with separate itineraries eventually back to the states. Marge and Sandy are staying in Nepal and then a few more vacation days in Thailand. Nicole and AJ are headed up to the Khumbu for more hiking and then a vacation in Thailand.

When we get to Bangkok it is early evening. Rick and Celia leave us for their own vacation and we find our way through customs and across a corridor to the Amari Hotel. After checking in, Linus and I opt for "John Henry's" a very western saloon atmosphere where we have a beer and hearty snacks while the rest have a more formal and expensive dinner or experience the luxury of a full body Thai massage. The evening ends in the bar with a great band. Between our waitress, Noi (means small) and the three very cute red-

jacketed white-trousered Filipino singers, I have a blast dancing in the aisles. We all, except Linus, dance, and even Linus enjoys himself. Jim outdoes himself with his interpretation of a Beatles song, Ron surprises us all with his agility, and Gerry shows us how he can shake his thing. Then to BED. Linus and I once again share a room (#2099)

Breakfast, the pool and checkout. Then we begin the long trip home made easier only by the luxury of business class starting with the executive lounge before departure. Flight 774 from Bangkok to Osaka then on to LA leaves Bangkok about 4:00 p.m. on Saturday November 7 and we will arrive in L.A. at 5:00 p.m. November 7 after sixteen hours.

A warm towel, Johnnie Walker Black and hot hors d'oeuvres to start the trip. During the flight we eventually go through sushi, asparagus, artichoke, and caviar with a glass of wine. Then some pastry, stir-fry prawns, cheeses, fresh fruit, mango, tart, a little Drambuie and some tea. It is going to be good to get home and stop eating.

I arrive home, all the richer for this Himalayan experience shared by old White Mountain friends and new friends. The trek group was amazingly compatible, enjoying each other's company through a kindred love of the mountains and the unifying challenges of the trail in one of the truly unique corners of the world twelve thousand miles and twelve time zones from New England.

Suggested reading:

The Last Forbidden Kingdom Mustang, Land of Tibetan Buddhism written by Vanessa S. Boeye with photographs by Clara Marullo. Published by Charles Tuttle Co., Boston, 1995.

134 pages. Excellent coffee table book, well-written describing the Mustang region.

East of Lo Monthang in the Land of Mustang written by Peter Matthiessen with photographs by Thomas Laird. Published by Timeless Books, New Delhi, 1995. 192 pages. Coffee table book, describing Mustang region and concentrating on more of the area's ceremonies and Buddhist gumpa art.

The Snow Leopard by Peter Matthiessen. Published by Penguin Books, 1996. 338 page paperback includes index. Winner of National Book Award.