

Travel reports from Nepal

E-mails sent to friends while travelling in Nepal,

January 2000

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Journey to Nepal and Kathmandu

Dear all



I have told most of you already that I will include you on my e-mailing list, when I write my travel reports from my holidays in Nepal. For those of you who know nothing about all this, a short explanation might be in order: I'm on holiday in Nepal. If you do not wish to receive any further e-mails from me, please write to andrew@blackwell.net and write "remove" in the subject line.

Before even venturing on to the plane taking me Eastwards, more Eastwards than ever before, I was trying to get over my melancholy from having left a most magnificent New Years party in a most beautiful house in Tuscany. But melancholy in the age of jet-setting Skippies (School Kids with Income and Purchasing Power) does not last long. Looking back at those days it seems as if my life is currently passing by like one of those scrolls that tell stories to children, ever providing new, colourful and exciting images while rolling the old ones up into the take-up spool.

The flight to Kathmandu was quite an event, as I flew with Middle Eastern Qatar Airways. The flights begin with a short prayer to Allah, and during the rest of the flight the TV monitors display four important bits of in-flight information: altitude, mph, temperature outside the aircraft and, through a compass-like diagram, the direction to Mekkhha. Not north, not south, just Mekkhha. Then, on channel seven of the audio, there were the monotonous prayer-songs (with 95% of the lyrics being the word "Allah") to accompany the diagram. Trying to beat jet-lag, I opted to stay awake all night, but ultimately - two hours before we landed in Doha, Qatar - gave in to the sand-bags pulling at my eye-lids. As a sort of joke, my girl-friend Silje and me listened to these prayers while we were dosing, but soon we realised what a peaceful quality the songs had, and I can't think of any better way to wake up to the sun rising over the Arabian desert, flying high above the air, than being roused by calm, monotonous chants to Allah

Changing planes in Doha was smooth and quite a non-event, but I did smile at the fact that just two days earlier I had never even heard of the place, and that I'll probably never visit the place ever in my life.

The Kathmandu-bound flight was mostly Allah and sleeping, but one hour before the end of the flight I woke up to the most magnificent expanse of Himalayan mountains, Everest and all. Kahtmandu airport has obviously tightened their security somewhat, since they somehow managed to let the Indian Airlines hijackers pass security check with enough weapons to liberate Kosovo. Boarding passengers are now greeted by a 5ft policeman wielding a baton made of a stick and looking as strict as possible.

And then, upon leaving the calm, relaxed, quiet airport building, life in Asia began with a true kick-start. As soon as my girl-friend and me came out of the revolving doors I had to check if we had Michael Jackson behind us. We were greeted by about three hundred people standing behind the railings and shouting and waving at us

fervently, all of them trying to sell us taxi-rides and hotels. I just paused a second before walking on, enjoying the attention given to me. Now I regret I didn't freeze that moment with a photograph.

The first trip through Kathmandu was just one big WOW experience, even if wow means being perversely amazed at poverty, congestion, overpopulation, pollution and the like. While these things would all disturb me in Europe, the conditions here (I am sorry to say) are so grotesque and hopeless, that all one can do is take a distance from the reality of it all, and be fascinated: cows competing with rickshaws, bikes, motorbikes, buses and cars, small children defecating on the streets, rubbish being burnt at every corner, streets with no paving and all the more potholes, practically all buildings uncompleted, and a layer of smog mixed with flung-up sand that often makes the next street-corner invisible.



After checking into a three-dollar per room per night hotel, we headed straight to Swayambunath, better known as the Monkey temple. We probably chose the best time of the day, as all the tourists were gone and the monkeys had obviously calmed down somewhat. Imagine walking round a Stupa three times, turning all the prayer wheels in the process, enjoying the most magnificent view of the Kathmandu valley, while a bunch of Rhesus Macaques just sit there watching you suspiciously, the young ones braced around their chests.

Yesterday we proceeded on to Pokhara, 150km east of Kathmandu. On the eight-hour bus journey I started reading the Kathmandu Post which had an article on tourist statistics. The article concluded with the following sentence "The largest amount of tourists from third world countries visiting Nepal were the tourists from Great Britain, Germany and the USA."

Pokhara is hippie paradise and the starting-point for many well-known treks round the Annapurna range. The mountains here in Nepal are definitely awe-inspiring. As a friend of mine in Kathmandu said: "We walked for days with a clear view of the mountain thinking 'yeah, right, whatever', but at some point on the fourth day this cloud drifted past the mountain, and that's when I realised how huge the fucker really was". The fucker in this case was Mount Everest. Some of the Annapurna peaks also reach above 8000m, and I witnessed the inverse effect: clouds had been covering the mountains, and at one point some clouds drifted to create a hole in what I thought was going to be the sky, but instead there was just this large, snow-clad wall looming.

I will probably be going on a Trek around the Annapurna massif in a few days time. I'll end with a few price quotes from a trekking agency. A private porter costs \$3 a day. A porter who knows his way around costs \$5. A porter who speaks English costs \$7. And a porter who really speaks English costs \$10. If I pay \$28 a day, everything is included, ie food, accomodation at lodges, drinks. However, I do have to pay myself for any "beer, whiskey or marijuana".

I will report soon when I return from either the Trek or the visit to Siklis with my girl-friend. Siklis is a small village inhabited by indigenous tibeto-mongolian people of the Gurung tribe, and Silje taught English there a few years ago for four months.

Do not hesitate to reply to this mail, if you ever reach this point.

Best regards, love, kisses, and anything else that's appropriate.

Andrew

Visit to Siklis

Dear All

Five more amazing days have now passed since my last report, and these have been marked by one of the absolute highlights of my existence as an avid holiday-taker: the visit to Siklis. .

Knowing that my physique would have to come up to shape for the day-long trek to the village, I spent the day before in the Pokhara valley, leaving behind my girl-friend and exploring the landscape and the many villages that litter the rice-paddied hillsides with a mountain-bike rented for \$0.50. My destination was a Buddhist stupa high up on a hill with no precisely defined route to get me there. I just cycled off, and soon got lost, balancing my way along the edges of various rice-paddies, entering one village after another, with farmers in huts built of clay and straw-thatched roofs observing and greeting me with as much awe as I would greet a bypassing Yeti. My entire little adventure was constantly accompanied by hordes of children in the near-distant hills shouting "Namaste" (Hello) at the top of their voices. In the villages themselves I was soon greeted by a cluster of three- and four-year-old kids, extending the Namaste-greeting with a held-out hand and an exclamation that usually sounded something like "Helloironerupeee", or "Givesweet". In the smaller villages, this form of mollifying tourists to sharing their supplies of mints and chocolates cannot be equated to begging, as it has apparently become something of a game between these children (quite in opposition to the genuine need-necessitated begging by the street-children in Kathmandu). I eventually reached the Buddhist stupa via a road designed to make people carry their bicycles all the way up.



Silje and me set out for Siklis early in the morning, with a Jeep taking us away from Pokhara along a dried-out river bed to the ridge where the trail to the village starts. At around eight a.m. we started our first ascent in order to climb the ridge that would lead us into the valley heading for Siklis. Months of jogging and swimming were obviously not enough to prepare me for the hardships of trekking on the steep, stony trails of Nepal, and having carted a heavy mountain-bike up a high hill the day before obviously didn't help much either.

At the top of the ridge, the first shock came, as Silje pointed to a small spot at the far end of the valley, high up on a hill, indicating that this was our destination for today. By that time, however, we had already been overtaken by numerous traders and porters that were heading for the same place, geared with little more than sandals and around 40kg of supplies for the village. Trails in Nepal are mainly used as trade-routes, and the "road" to Siklis formed no exception, as the day-long trek is the only way to ship things in and out of the place populated by no less than 4000 people.



Down in the valley we reached our first halt, and ate a generous portion of Dhal Bhat Tarkari (which means no more than Lentils Rice Vegetables), a dish which provides people with all the nutrients necessary to survive and therefore is a perfect wholesome meal for a trek. Provided one doesn't suffer from the kind of stomach-upset my feeble Western intestines were trying to deal with the preceding few days. I spent pretty much the rest of the trek regretting having eaten so much. However, this trouble was easily forgotten as we wound past village after village, encountering all-pervasive child-cries of "Namaste".

Finally, at about two o'clock, we reached the foot of the hill where the three-hour, one-thousand metre ascent to Siklis began. As we stopped, stretched and contemplated eating (I quickly decided to pass on the menu of Dhal Bhat Tarkari), a load of porters walked past with huge pipe-lines. We were informed that they were on their way to the hydro-electricity station providing electricity for Siklis which was being repaired. We were also informed that Siklis currently had a power-cut. Incidentally, this was already in its eighth month.

Three hours later, we looked back on our 20km trail, as we walked into the stony streets of Siklis. The first person Silje knew from her four-month stay there three years ago invited us to stay at their house, and we were immediately beckoned inside to take a seat next to the fire-place that warmed (and smoked) the inside of the house built of clay and stone. It all seemed like a dream to me, as we were joined by the house-owner, his wife and their new-born baby at her breast, and the black puppy of the house, round the fire for a cup of tea. Silje did all the conversing, as even Nepali was the villagers second language. Gurung being their first. A note of explanation is due here: Siklis is one of the biggest Gurung communities. Gurungs are a tibeto-mongolian (and formerly nomadic) tribe that settled in the foothills of the Nepal Himalayas a few centuries ago. Most of their culture and economic forms remain, as even Siklis is mostly self-subsistent, with its rice, beans, corn and cattle providing most of the things needed for them to stay alive (and much much more).

The first evening marked a reunion of Silje with many of the people she knew when she worked there as a teacher. Many more fire-side teas followed, and we ended our evening back at the fire-side of the family that put us up. As they started preparing our meal and served us a starter of fried beans, Silje kindly explained to them that I wouldn't be able to eat any more, as I had a problem with my stomach. Our hosts nodded and smiled, and a few minutes later two huge portions of Dhal Bhat Tarkari were placed in front of our feet. I went pale before I even started eating it. There was not so much a misunderstanding, than a non-understanding. Stomach problems due to dietary changes is obviously a very Western phenomenon. I ate as much as I could, which was not much and way too much, and due to the expansionary nature of rice, my night's sleep was accompanied by constant stomach-cramps.

The next day, our only full day in Siklis, was spent visiting Silje's friends and her showing me the school where she had taught. At one point, in the middle of the day, we came across a village wedding-ceremony, and we were immediately invited to take part in the festivities. After having been blessed with marks of rice and red powder on our foreheads, we joined the procession which was led by musicians, taking the groom from the house of the bride to his own house, where the bride was now expecting him. At the other end, we were asked to sit down with everyone else, and we soon started a conversation with an 81-year old man, who had served in the British army as a Gurkha soldier in WW2, and had met Nehru and Gandhi during his time in India. I started getting nervous again, as they started serving everybody great big whallops of rice as part of the wedding feast, but Silje explained that we still had other places to go, and so we left before further calamity.



The next morning, the day of our departure, we sat around the fire of our hosts one last time for a cup of tea and some (imported) noodles, playing with the dog, or "kukur" in Nepali. Shortly before we left, I told Silje she should tell the owners as a joke, that we would take the dog with us. She proceeded to say, so, merrily cuddling the little kukur. It never occurred to us, that such a statement would not necessarily be seen as a joke. The owners (who had even prepared a cooked meal for their pet the evening before), smiled and got up from the fire-place. While the mother tried to chase the dog which was running around, the father fetched a leash and asked us if this was enough. We could hardly believe our eyes. Silje in the end had to explain that we couldn't really take the dog with us, as we would have difficulty taking it on the plane (we left out the bit about international quarantine regulations). .

The dogs owner was fairly surprised about this, but I was still given a lovely Gurung back-sack as a goodbye present.



And off we went, leaving the most amazing place behind us, trekking for one day until we reached Pokhara by jeep. In our rooms, we just fell onto our beds, exhausted, wondering if it was all just a lovely dream (for once reality made this cliché ring true).

I will probably rest two or three days before proceeding on my one-week trek halfway round the Annapurna range. Until I'm back, I hope you all are doing well, and any reply is still very welcome. (Thanks for the ones I got but didn't get down to answering individually).

Love,

Andrew

Trek round the Annapurnas

Dear All

The long delay since my last report has been due to my prolonged absence from the modernity of internet-cafes, instead roaming around the backlands and highlands of this country, with the guest houses on the way only offering fax, telephone, US-dollar exchange booths, every Western dish imaginable, as well as books of all sorts, including a semiotic treatise by Umberto Eco. But no e-mail.

Two days after Siklis I decided to go on a trek big style, so Silje phoned a friend of hers in Kathmandu who promptly sent a porter/guide over to help me out for \$8 a day, which included his food, lodging, bus-transfer tickets and air-fare. Waiting for the porter to arrive, I scouted all the trekking-equipment shops at Pokhara's tourist-o.d.-ing lakeside for the gear I needed for the climate at the other side of the Himalaya. Remarkably, \$25 got me everything I needed, which included a Gore-tex (Korean-style) wind-jacket with detachable inner fleece, a hand-sewn pair of loose liny trekking trousers, a flash-light, a pair of sunglasses, sunscreen and iodine-tincture to disinfect the drinking water (o.k., admittedly the flash-lights provided batteries failed after ten minutes use, the sunglasses' bars came off constantly, and the iodine tincture had a screw-cap which opened, but refused to close again, but otherwise the equipment proved invaluable).

A few hours later, the porter arrived. Now the thing with porters is, that - for obvious reasons - you cannot go and pick your porters off a shelf from a wide array of different models, like the wind-jackets sold here. You get good porters, and you get bad porters, and so you just have to accept what comes. However, as things usually go with me, I ended up with a complete weirdo. First thing he disagreed with the price agreed with the Trekking agent, after coming all the way from Kathmandu, and the big tall and strong porter promised turned out to be a small lean chain-smoker who liked his occasional drink.

Things came to a good start when, at six a.m. the next morning, I was waiting nervously outside the hotel for twenty-five minutes for the porter and the taxi to come and pick me up bound for the airport, where the plane for Jomsom, north of the Annapurna Himalaya, was going to leave at 7a.m. At six thirty, they came, with not even an attempt at an excuse (later, I found out that the guy didn't carry an alarm-clock with him, but relied on his "internal alarm-clock", which, probably after having been heavily greased by Apple brandy the night before, let him down miserably on the day of departure).



However, we made it to the airport, and, predictably, the plane was running late. Bad weather? No. Transfer flight delayed? Nope. Explanation given: the pilot overslept!

The flight itself was a major event. All the tourists (save me) nudged and pushed and ran like idiots when the gate opened so that they could get a window-seat. The plane was a small sixteen-seater that only consisted of window seats. Plus, the ones right at the front of the queue were directed to the front end of the plane, where they had a marvellous view of the wings. I got a good seat, being last to board, and the thirty-minute flight

to Jomsom showed some beautiful mountain scenery, while I was meditating the fact that this was the first and probably only time in my life that I flew to a place and walked all the way back (hopefully). Turning round the valley to the back of the Annapurna Himal, heavy winds set in and the plane started shaking and dropping profusely, with hilltops seemingly at arms-reach. I was expecting anything, and I was getting ready to crouch forward as the plane started landing on this grassy patch. However, this was no crash-landing, but a routine approach to Jomsom airport, which is no more than a patch of grass. When the propellers slowed down, I almost started crying: one, because I was still alive, and two, because the landscape offering itself to me was absolutely breathtaking.

Being north of the Himalaya, this was basically already part of the Tibetan plateau, which is marked by wide open plains, hugged tightly by bare and well-rounded hills and mountains. The term moon-landscape describes the vegetation, and upon exiting the airport, a couple of Tibetan-clad men riding beautiful long-maned horses passed by. It all seemed too good to be true. The rest of the first day consisted of a trek



further north to a village and pilgrimage-goal called Muktinath, at 3800m above sea-level. My first problems with the porter soon started, as the 1200m ascent to the place was interspersed with a break every twenty metres. Not knowing if this was due to his poor shape or his dissatisfaction at the wage, I went along with the frequent brakes, which instead allowed me to enjoy the mesmerising landscape. Arriving at Muktinath, I really felt as if I had entered the end of the world.



The only path continuing was the famous Thorung La pass, which has seen a few people being caught short and snowed in at 5400m. And along the way to Muktinath, the only other path veering off led to Lo Manthang, the regal capital of the Kingdom of Mustang (sometimes called the Hidden Kingdom, Secret Kingdom, Forbidden Kingdom, as it only opened up to tourists in 1992, and still only 500 are allowed to go there every year, provided they pay a \$700 fee. The region is no longer politically autonomous, but is now a district of Nepal).

The first night was stayed in Muktinath, and I woke up to a soaring, altitude-sickness-induced head-ache, and a porter lying in the bed next to me, first snoring away, and then suddenly waking up and giving me long staring glances that almost freaked me out (as a matter of fact, despite his status as "guide", he hardly said a word all trek, but would be that much better at staring at me for long periods of time, until I almost fell to pieces of self-consciousness). The temperature was well below zero with no heating in the house and the frozen toilet-water having to be hacked apart in order to be able to flush.

At Muktinath, we visited the shrine and temples (a weird mixture of buddhist and hindu iconography). The place was in fact put on the UNESCO list of world cultural heritages, but the only living being guarding the place was a tail-wagging dog who seemed very happy to see me and at worst would have licked me to shreds. After Muktinath, the trek was going slowly all the way back to Pokhara, letting me witness gradual but very marked changes in landscape, vegetation, climate and ethnic cultures, as the trail followed the Kali Gandaki river to the southern face of the Annapurna range.

Four days after almost catching frost-bite I was bathing in a hot spring and lying half-naked in the sun. The zero-vegetation moonscape of Mustang gradually became "Swiss-style" landscape with fir-trees, changing to become fields with Apple Trees a bit further down, followed by Millet-paddies, then Orange-trees bearing full fruit and ultimately Rice-paddies amongst Jungle-like forests with the odd Rhododendron tree on the way. Muktinath and most of Northern Mustang are inhabited by Tibetans (not tibeto-mongolian descendents, but pure Tibetans. The beauty of this area was also that the Tibetans here were in a way more Tibetan than those in Tibet, as they have no Chinese government interfering with their culture and life-styles: many villages contained beautiful buddhist monasteries centuries old, which are difficult to find in Tibet itself, thanks to the Cultural Revolution). Jomsom and villages south of it are inhabited by Thakalis of tibeto-mongolian descent, but already markedly different, and the villages at the end of the trek there were Magar settlements (mainly of Indo-Aryan origin).



The only thing that didn't change much along the way was my porter's bizarre comportment, which included a lot of staring, and occasional bouts of Apple-brandy-aided blabbering in the evenings, when I was trying to write my diary. As time went on, I began to feel sorry for the guy, which was aided by his stories of him trying to get together enough money to pay for his Daughter's school fees, as well as seeing all the money I paid him dwindling away in drink and loans which he had got on previous treks having to be repaid to irate creditors. At the end of the trip, out of a sense of sympathy and compassion, I tipped him another \$10. However, as I discovered a bit too late, somewhere during the last two days, one of my \$50 notes disappeared from the secret pocket of my back-pack, the existence of which only my porter could have known of. Such forms of self-tipping are not unheard-of, but I was not too pleased about it, as facing him in Kathmandu with the question "Did you steal \$50 from me?" is not exactly a way of getting my money back, nor for making sure that it's being used for his daughter's education, not his drinking-problem.

The whole trail catered for tourists really well, as its diversity makes it an obvious goal for tourists. I was lucky, though, to travel out of season, so I usually was alone in a lodge or shared it with one other tourist. The menus were good evidence of the nature of the place in high season: the food offered ranged from Weinerskneitzel to Pizza ai Funghi. Other items on the menus were Swiss Roasti, Swiss Museli, Apple Fritter, Appel Fitter and even

Apple Flitter. One place even offered both Cornflax with Curd and Cornflex with Milk. I almost felt like asking if I could have Cornflex, but with Curd. The massive onslaught of tourists has made ACAP, the regional sustainable development NGO which Silje taught for, put up large posters and publish many pamphlets reminding the visitors of their responsibilities, almost setting them off on guilt-trips for even visiting the region. However, I carefully filtered my water so as not to have to buy plastic water bottles, and I took no warm showers to save on firewood (the collection of which erodes the hills, with following landslides making them uninhabitable). Upon telling this an elderly Australian Couple, they answered: "Oh, you're doing your trek the eco way. How interesting.". On the other hand, I almost got annoyed with a local villager who took a beer bottle out of her house, looked at it, took four large paces and flung it far away into the Kali Gandaki gorge. It has never been a great secret that it's not only the tourists who have a problem with waste-disposal, but in this case I got very angry and stopped short of saying something. For all that has been said about the simple and thereby almost virtuous life-styles of these village dwellers, I have come away from this trek realising more than ever, that such people are not somehow intrinsically better than Westerners, but that they merely haven't had as much opportunity to do wrong.

I could tell many more stories about the Trek, but e-mailing costs a lot of money in these corners of the world, and I tend to get a bit nervous every time the guys running the internet-cafe come and stand behind my shoulder, reading the stuff I'm writing, sometimes even aloud. However, one or two more things won't harm anyone. Since the porter was holding me back a lot, I didn't exactly get as fit as planned during my trek, but I did manage to join a group of village kids up at 2800m for a game of football, on a pitch which was about 15 metres wide, and 200m long. The teams they played in had about three rows of defence, four rows of mid-field, and everybody trying to score goals, including the five goal-keepers. All the expectations they had in me, the guy from England who looks like a player from Manchester United (they didn't quite know the name of him though, Schmeichel?), were soon disappointed, as the thin oxygen soon saw me sitting at the side of the pitch, gasping for little snaps of cold air, hoping not to pass out. Even if the air up there was a bit thin, it was marvellously fresh. That is, apart from the time when it took me twenty minutes to overtake a troupe of farting donkeys. It was bad enough having to pass them when they came from the opposite direction, but in this incident I had to overtake about fifty of them, all carrying their loads, and -almost incredibly - every single one of them trumpeting away merrily. It was almost as if they were holding a little concert in honour of my walking past, tubas at the back, trumpets at the front. We were right down at 1200m, but boy was the air thin. The donkeys were also annoying in another respect: they don't care who is coming towards them and if they're passing by someone. Once or twice I did the mistake of standing on the outside of the path when a donkey passed me by, almost nudging me over the precipice into the Kali Gandaki Gorge fifty metres further down. After that, I decided to stay on the inside of the path, which was not only safer, but also gave me the possibility to nudge the donkey over the precipice, should it start on a little concertino in Fsharp.

After these two days rest, I shall be off to a region called Chitwan, which is a National Park, where I hope to ride Elephants while out looking for Tigers and Rhinos. Then it's on to Kathmandu to do the culture-trip, before heading back to London. Thanks a lot to everyone who responded to my e-mail, I'll try and write more personal responses in Kathmandu.

Lots of Love

Andrew

Chitwan and Conclusion

Dear All

This last instalment of my holidays in Nepal differs from the other three in the simple fact that I am now no longer in Nepal, but merely sitting in a dark room under the grey skies of London, thinking if I should start sobbing profusely, like I did when I came home from holidays as a six-year-old. So please forgive me if this mail lacks the enthusiasm and vigour of the preceding ones.

After another three days bumming around in Pokhara, I set off at the beginning of my last week to the southern plains of Nepal, more specifically Chitwan National Park, which is jungle-like and offers Safari-style activities to tourists who haven't yet made it to Kenya (I'm saying this, because people who have been to Kenya and lived the splendours of an African safari would no doubt give this one a miss). After being shipped by jeep from the bus station to Sauraha, a village consisting entirely of hotels named with a seemingly random combination of the words "Tiger", "Jungle", "Safari", "Lodge", "Sunset" and "Rhino", I made my way to a hotel at the far end of the village, much to the annoyance of the jeep-driver, who was determined to see me check in to "his" hotel, to which his jeep kindly drove me, without being asked to.

All the transfer jeeps are operated by very aggressive touts who are more keen to get people into hotels than into their jeeps, and in the course of my holiday I have taken to a sadistic pleasure of doing exactly the opposite of what touts recommend me to do (an example: "I recommend private Elephant. Private Elephant much better than government Elephant." "Oh, good. I'll take a ride on a government Elephant in that case").

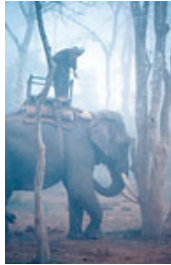


Upon checking in at the riverside lodge, which was made up of a collection of fairly comfortable huts with a very colonial setup, I approached the in-house jungle guide to organise a programme for me for the next two days. So we sat down together, and he started on a two-hour monologue, which he had obviously learnt by heart, and was now reciting for the 234586th time. Although his recital was of a fairly decent English, any questions asked usually were answered in a curious language-mixture that threw in some words in French and German and

made no sense whatsoever. One piece of his vocabulary seemed to me particularly peculiar: "If we go trek in jungle, we walk on road for few hours an' then we go jig-jag, jig-jag, jig-jag thru the jungle." The last time I'd come across a similar word was in a Graham Greene novel ("Hello, sah. Sah wan gal? Sah wanna jig-jig? I have good gal for sah, sah gonna jig-jig all night long."). However, I soon realised the word in question was "zig-zag", so I just nodded while trying to control myself. All in all, the guide organised a substantial package for around \$30, which included a canoe ride, entry into the park, a ride on an Elephant, and a half-day trek with a guide through the jungle.

So, on day one I promptly went on a canoe ride along river banks with crocodiles sunbathing on them, which took us to an "Elephant breeding centre". There are no wild Elephants in Nepal, and we had the privilege to visit one of the places where this state of affairs was being preserved. The place was full of Elephants, mainly pregnant Elephant cows, baby Elephants, and their parents. At about two years of age, baby Elephants are tamed and trained. This usually happens by placing the baby between its parents and calling out the orders to the parents, who then duly comply. The baby, confused in the middle, starts to imitate its parents, and thus a new Elephant is taught to obey human beings. In the meantime, they are chained to the ground and are fed with about 300kg of food every day. There was, however, one fairly harrowing scream being let off by a 44-year old male Elephant, who clearly didn't enjoy being tied to the ground all day. The cries, which likened a lion's roar but were about ten times as loud, resounded and echoed all over the plain, and it was even more bizarre hearing the Elephant back at the hotel, about one hour's walk away.

The same evening, the guide came and informed me and the other two tourists staying at the hotel, that they would not be able to organise tickets for government-owned Elephants, since the queuing system put hotel managers last in the queue. It was fairly obvious that he, like everybody else, was dead keen to sell us a ride on a privately owned Elephant, which doesn't actually go into the Park proper. However, he presented us with the only other alternative being that we go and queue for a ride on a government Elephant, at 5.30 a.m.. I duly volunteered to do this, and the guide nodded and walked off, his face marked by the anger and disappointment that he couldn't get the more handsome commission given to him by the owners of private Elephants. So, I promptly got up at 5.30, and headed towards the river, where I was going to take a short cut to the stables to start queueing. It was pitch-dark, and the mist didn't help me to see much further than my outstretched hand. I arrived at the beach, turned to my left, then to my right, and then to my left again, by which time I didn't have a clue where I was, and which direction I was facing, as everything looked the same 360 degrees around me. A few steps would have basically taken me back to my hotel, but as I didn't know where I was going, a few steps in the opposite direction would have taken me to join the crocodiles in the river. Then suddenly, I heard a splash and a roar, and I realised "Aha. Hippopotamus". So, trying to avoid the river, I started walking in the opposite direction, until I realised there are no hippopotamuses in Chitwan. Or in the whole of Asia for that matter. The only other animal in question was an Elephant, and it was this animal's noises that finally guided me back onto the road, which got me to the stables and, ultimately, a ride on a government Elephant (which are supposed to be lazy, expensive, and unpopular with the local population, just like bureaucrats).



The one-hour ride was quite an event, as we managed to spot a Rhino and ride within a three-metre distance to it (I was about to capture a nice photo of it, when some idiot tourist started talking and scared it off. I now have a nice photo of a Rhino's butt). But that was basically as good as it got in Chitwan. The half-day trek in the afternoon proved to be a bit of a flop, as the only traces of animals around seemed to be their droppings (which my guide kindly identified for me). The only notable sightings (notable meaning bigger than a Mosquito), were a couple of "hog-deers" (I didn't quite figure out if this was a pig-shaped deer, or a deer-like pig), some rhesus macaques (the same kind that walk around temples in Kathmandu, hardly a sample of remote wildlife), and, last but not least, a wild chicken. Not surprisingly, this animal has some striking resemblances with straightforward domesticated chickens. However, the wild type is a bit more hyperactive, and the one I spotted ran around in a way to confirm this trait (as a fellow English tourist I met said later in the hotel: "What, you also saw a wild chicken? They're vicious, those things, aren't they! I was so glad I was on top of an Elephant when I saw one". Incidentally, the wild chicken was the only animal he saw when riding said Elephant).

Towards the end of the jungle trek, my guide pointed out some long marks in the ground and said these were the result of the mating-procedure between Rhinos. This is how he put it, with every vowel, especially the o's, being drawn out to emphasise the drama of the event: "In sexing-time, man rhino is on woman rhino and they walking around like dis for loooong time, three hours, four hours, and all the time they do jig-jag, jig-jag". I knew that this word had to come back in some other use, and the guide's body-movements left no doubt as to what he was talking about.

That, basically, was my Safari, and last Wednesday I headed back to Kathmandu, to enjoy the last three days doing the culture-thing. I thought the temples and pagodas and stupas and gompas would possibly be quite interesting. However, I was completely awe-struck. On my first day back in Kathmandu, I was standing on the ninth floor of a temple pagoda, enjoying one of the best views of Kathmandu and the surrounding Himalayan giants, and when I saw an aeroplane take off, it completely struck me. I suddenly realised that time was running out fast, and, as a result, I couldn't quite shake off this melancholy during the last two days. I realised I wanted to stay another month, maybe two.

Someone once told me that most people who go to India come back and describe the experience as having changed their lives. Even if such a statement is a bit on the dramatic side, I could comfortably say that Nepal has this potential quality, and that I saw a great deal of the country. But one month, however long it seems, is just enough to start getting warmed up. Most tourists I met were not there for the first time. They had come back for the umpteenth time. And long before I even set foot on the aeroplane back, I was determined to come back. Maybe I'll go back for a longer time to that region of the world one day, but I don't quite know what I would want to do (maybe as an advisor to their local film-industry: "Don't use so much percussion in your action-scenes"). On the one hand, there was something decadently wonderful about travelling around backpacker-style, staying at comfortable places, eating good food, meeting nice people from your end of the world and paying almost no money whatsoever.

A friend of mine suggested I should write my e-mails in two ways: the way a backpacker would do it, and then the way I saw things. He thought this would make an amusing satire. However, I could never have claimed I was distant enough from this type of travelling to make fun of it. But I saw his point: there is another side to a country like Nepal which has very little to do with backpacking, and I did manage to get a few glimpses of this life. And it also fascinated me to bits. So maybe I will return next time and spend two months in Siklis. Or in the suburbs of Kathmandu. That's when I might be able to write my satire on tourists. Whatever I'll do, I will always look back at the post-modern mess of a holiday I had in this wonderful country and I'll simply say: I had a great time.

Love Andrew