

## Wednesday, November 8

I set my alarm for a half-hour before dawn, but I was up before it went off. I struck my camp, which around here meant I rolled up my sleeping bag and packed my duffel. All the other chores were handled by my "staff." While Hark was brewing tea and working on breakfast, I retired to the local summit to watch the sun rise.

As the sky blushed with the hint of dawn, the first rays of light kissed the mountains. As expected, sunrise on Fishtail was the prettiest. The light changed angle and color every instant, and I had to resist the temptation to blow off all my film at once.

Hark brought me a cup of hot sweet lemonade. The ground fell off hundreds, maybe thousands of feet below me and there was nothing at all between me and the huge snow peaks of the Himalayas. The sun was rising so fast you could actually see the lit part drip down the mountain like honey. Life is composed of a stream of individual moments, and this one was one of the best.

Then, Bam Dev showed up and took me down to his village to see his school. I thought that the village was the little cluster of houses just below the tents, but it turned out to be all the way at the bottom of that little branch trail about which I complained so bitterly yesterday. Damn.

On the way down, I learned that he used to be a teacher, but as 'Dukhi' he now ran the place while others taught the classes. He was simply delighted I was interested enough to come down and tour the school. It has only three rooms: two classrooms and an office. On the outside is painted the school's motto: "Knowledge is Power."

After my tour, Bam Dev brought me into his house. He is one of Kailasthan's most prominent citizens and he owns a house with a commanding view of the mountains. It has two rooms, one for him and his wife and the other for his two sons. All walls are earthen, what would be called adobe in the US. The food is cooked in the master bedroom, and the boy's room also serves as the living and dining rooms. His wife served me a traditional Nepalese breakfast drink, boiled water buffalo milk. It was far sweeter than cow's milk and I very much enjoyed it.

All over his walls, he had pictures of Communist and Marxist leaders. In the middle of the room hung a sign explaining the human organs of reproduction on one side and various schemes of contraception on the other. It's starting to look like Bam Dev is the village radical. No wonder I'm starting to like him.

Their etiquette is considerably different from ours. The men sit on the furniture in the center of the room while the women either stand or sit on the floor in the corners. No effort is made to engage the women in conversation. They

witnessed our little conversation, but they did not participate in it. I made a portrait of the family as I left, but they looked harsh and stark and I really wasn't happy with what I got.

The grandfather stopped me and gave me a half dozen lemons. Then we humped back up the trail, up the hill and up the godforsaken side trail into the sky. The contrast between the low ceiling earthen house and the boundless Himalaya was amazing. This time it was a much easier hike up to the campsite, primarily because I knew exactly how far it was and could gauge my efforts accordingly. That narrow steep trail is actually two staircases of rock separated by a short level area. I counted steps and found that there were 103 steps in the first group and 120 in the second. That's roughly the equivalent of walking up to the roof of a twenty-story building without a rest. And these guys were marching as fast as rush hour commuters at Grand Central.

But I made it. Once there, I got breakfast: a fried egg on toast, banana porridge and black tea. Then I said my good-byes to my new friends and headed up the trail. Bam Dev walked with me to the next village, but he had to turn back at the first village to make his morning classes. He and Durga had an emotional parting, and then we were off again. Later, Durga told me that Bam was telling him what a nice guy I was and how pleased he was that I was interested in his school.

From there on, it was up and down and up again. In the late morning we stopped in an orderly little village to buy some cokes. There I met some Austrian trekkers who had been on the road since mid-October. They were from Innsbruck, and were therefore used to the mountains. They spoke of them glowingly - they were not used to seeing mountains over 7,000. Of course, they meant meters, but there is something vaguely demeaning about the number. To me, 7,000 is the size of Harney Peak in South Dakota, not a mighty Himalaya. Machapuchre (just shy of 7,000 meters), is a manly 22,000 when measured in feet.

After a pleasant rest, it was up, up, up, down, up, up, down, up. We were walking around a gentle curve when there was a banging sound and Durga pulled up short. I stopped behind him in time to see a huge water buffalo charge into the place I would have been if we hadn't stopped. It seems the family was moving the animal from a field uphill to one below the trail. Instead of crossing the path, the water buffalo bolted up the trail at us. Durga and I inched up off the trail as the water buffalo thundered up and down, resisting all efforts to usher him peacefully into his field. Finally, he grudgingly acceded, and was safely locked in his field.

By the time I realized we were in danger, the actual hazard had passed. Then we were on our way again; but it was chilling to think that I had been hiking alone, I would have been trampled to death just a few minutes ago.

Lunch is early in Nepal, and we stopped at 10:00 AM in a shady glade under the watchful eye of Annapurna. As at our other stops, there are children everywhere. Almost all have two words for me. The first is invariably "Hello"

and the second is what they want: Hello chocolate, hello *paesa* (money) or hello pen. Some years ago, it was fashionable to hand out pens to begging children in the hope it would help them become literate. Instead, they simply became a form of currency, desirable only because they were available. It is universally understood that encouraging begging only makes for more dependent children. It teaches them nothing of value.

Durga taught me the local word for 'I have nothing, go away.' Every time I used it on a kid, he instantly obeyed, but I invariably got a double-take and a hint of surprise too. The people are peaceful and apparently are happy. They seem to smile and laugh at the slightest provocation. They honor their elders and cherish their children. Religion is a central feature of their lives, not just a Sunday morning chore. They value all life, from the most irritating insect all the way up to the King himself. Families stay close together. Chains of generations live out the centuries in the same village.

Self Defensive Factoid: There is no way to say "Don't shoot, I'm a journalist" in Nepali. Being an absolute monarchy, they don't really have the concept of 'journalist' down. The best they could do is 'Hear kahile palvi, kune kuramarn hudein' - which translates as "Don't harm me, I'm your neighbor."

A word about caste. In India, caste is linked to social status and occupation. If you were born into the merchant caste, you're going to become a merchant. Many people have no aptitude or desire for the careers they are fated to follow. With democratization, a large number of jobs have artificially been held aside for members of the so-called untouchable caste; up to a third of total hiring. Promotions by law go disproportionately to the untouchables, so other castes with untouchables working for them are in a tough position. Subordinates today are likely to be supervisors tomorrow.

In Nepal, caste is much more related to family. There are 33 recognized castes, tribes or ethnic groups; of which only twelve have any significant numbers. Your family name is the caste name: so all Sherpas are named Sherpa. All three of my crew are Gurungs, meaning I am the only one in the party whose last name is not Gurung. They are not geographically concentrated, and there are little enclaves of Gurungs throughout Nepal. Neither are they occupationally restricted: a Gurung can grow up to be anything a Sherpa, Magar, Taru, Rai or Limbu could be.

The obvious exception to this is the virtual corner the Sherpas have on high-altitude guide and porter work. It's not that they're any better at it, but they got a reputation early and they exploited it. This is a lot like the Navajo's having a reputation as ironworkers. They're no better or worse than anyone else, but if somebody has a different opinion, you go with the flow and smile when you cash the checks.

Any system of nomenclature that uses only about a dozen last names must get unwieldy, but Nepal's population is very small and the system works. I'd bet that there are more Jim Smith's in America than there are Gurungs in Nepal.

It was almost noon before lunch was served. I had a vegetable fritatta, fried potatoes, a flavorful cole slaw, stewed tomatoes and lightly fried bread.

The porters are simply amazing. Instead of backpacks, they carry their burdens in huge conical baskets. Instead of straps around the shoulders, they hang their load on a single tumpline that runs over the top of the head. The strain on the neck muscles and spine must be incredible, but they have been doing it this way since time immemorial, and must have adapted. Our guys are carrying a light load of about 35 lb. each, and today, Durga is grabbing my day pack before I can put it on. All I have to do is carry my camera, make photographs and keep up with the group.

Today's trek was a lot of up and a lot of down. Straight out of Kailasthan, we descended for a good distance. Then, we climbed up over a big hill, but not quite as big as the one the village is on. At the top, there was exactly 14" of level ground. I know this because I take a size 13 boot, and there was just about an inch to spare. At the bottom of the hill was an equally sharp saddle that had me with one foot going uphill while the other was still going down.

It was tough, but it was a great day's walk. Like a sailor getting his sea legs, I feel I have acclimated to Nepal. Today I was consistently out in front of the porters, and Durga and I stopped several times to let them catch up. I'm no honorary Sherpa yet, but I'm getting there.

I thought the name of the mountain 'Machapuchre' meant "fish-tail" in Nepali, but today Durga gave me the literal translation. "Macha" means 'a piece' and "Pucere" means 'tail'. "Machapuchre" literally means 'a piece of tail.'

In the early afternoon, we passed through the 'Nestle Gate,' a rock formation of considerable importance in Nepali mythology. Durga apologized for not being able to properly relate the story, but this is what I got out of it. The old trail through the region was steep and dangerous, and a new trail was needed. One night, a hero had a dream that showed him a new trail. He set out to cut the trail, but eventually became lost. Then, the gods set for him two great stone gates to get him aligned and on his way. To this day, people still put offerings there to thank the gods. Durga went into the woods to find a fern for the gods, so I did too.

It was a nice story, but I wondered how anyone could remain lost when the Himalayas were constantly visible. You just can't buy better benchmarks than these.

The nestle gate also serves as the boundary between the agrarian areas we'd been in and the deep jungle. Just as soon as we passed through the gate, we spotted a

monkey basking on the trail ahead. I slammed the 180 mm. lens on my Nikon, but he bolted before I could get off a shot.

**Primate factoid:** There are two kinds of monkeys native to Nepal, the common langur (light grey, black face), and the rhesus macaque (brown, pink face). The fellow in the trail was a common langur.

A little farther up the trail we heard this strange ringing sound that had a distinctly metallic sound to it. In fact it was a nest of termite-like insects who seem to like to sing. As we passed the nest, it got awfully loud, but we soon left it far behind us.

The Nepalis frequently paint the symbols of their political parties on their houses. A sun signifies the Communist Party, the tree is the Nepali Congress Party, and the plow is the Democratic Party. The swastika is widely employed as a religious symbol, having no relation to the Nazi movement. Curiously, back up at the school, there's a six-pointed star (in America, unmistakable as the Star of David) on the school flag while swastikas adorn the walls. Anywhere else it would be an atrocity, but in a 4000 year old culture, things are different. Things like Hitler, the Holocaust and Israel happened only yesterday: that these folks adopted ancient religious icons is not an important issue in Nepal.

It wasn't a long uphill, but it was a bitch with a steep grade and lots of small round rocks that identified the trail as a seasonal wash. Once over the top, we plunged once again; this time into a village called Libini Bhanjayng (Bhanjayng is the Nepali word for saddle or cooley).

Libini Bhanjayng sits at 3,500' and it faces Baudha Himal, Annapurna 2 and Lumjung Himal. Because this is the height of the trekking season, the primary campsite was taken and we took an alternate. Durga got us a spot in the back of a friend's house. It was pounded flat by centuries of human occupation, having been somebody's back yard since the dawn of history. It was pretty spectacular, looking out at the mountains and the rice terraces below. The only two drawbacks were that we were overrun with children and that we had to share space with the livestock. They had two water buffalo, a half dozen oxen and a slew of chicken.

The children were the bigger problem. While Durga and I were out working on some compass bearings, somebody swiped my pocketknife. I get the feeling that there was no hostile intent but that the knife was shiny and inviting. In any event, I'm keeping a good eye on my Nikon.

I guess I suspected that there would be more wilderness than there is. It's rough and challenging terrain, but there is always a village nearby. Ask most people where they live and they'll tell you the trailhead and the number of days walk to

get home. Nepal is covered with villages which are centuries old and have never been accessible by road. <sup>1</sup>

Dinner tonight is *dal bhat*, tomato soup, spicy fried noodles and - get this - trail popcorn. Because we're staying at a house, I used the latrine before going to sleep.

One of the more fascinating things you discover when you leave the country is that people do basic things differently than we do. And offloading bodily wastes is about as basic as you can get. Still, if you don't want to read about it, skip the next three paragraphs.

The roof of the outhouse is not high enough for me to stand inside, so I grudgingly go native. There is no toilet in the outhouse, just a flat slab of rock with an oval shaped pit carved into it. Alongside are two stone footpads, and - pardon my assumption, but no instructions were supplied - the procedure seems to be to stand on the footpads, squat over the hole and release. Since birth, I have been conditioned not to go unless in the standing or seated positions; squatting has never been an option. I finally manage to convince the body to release, and realize that it has taken me until the age of 42 to find out just how mercilessly complete and witheringly absolute my initial toilet training must have been.

Useless factoid: the Nepali euphemism for urinating is "making water."

While on the subject, I need to tell you that my guides will casually hop into the woods, drop their pants and defecate. Local flora is used in place of toilet paper, and the presence of broadleaves is a determining factor in where to stop. I surmise that the leaves are administered with the left hand because Nepalis eat exclusively with the right hand. No forks or knives either, just the right hand. Especially (as here) where water is in short supply, it makes sense that you assign one hand to service the input port and one to service the output port, but enough of that.

Because our hosts are also Gurungs, our arrival is something of a family reunion. I therefore decide to turn in early so as not to inhibit their party by making them explain and translate everything. Anyhow, it's getting cold tonight and there may be a storm brewing. I'm tired from the hike, and there is nowhere I'd rather be than in my sleeping bag.

I started thinking about the comment Bam made to Durga about me. I'm not sure why, but it started bringing back all of this sahib stuff. I'm not used to having people wait on me or carry my load. In the last two days, I have been frequently stopped trying to clean up after myself or trying to serve my own food. It is quite clear that they are here to serve me. They carry for me, navigate

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<sup>1</sup> Nepal's population (1992 est.) is just over 20,000,000. The population density is 148 persons per sq km: a lot more than the US, but less than half the density of India.

for me, negotiate for me, translate for me, cook for me and clean up after me. This all goes against my democratic grain like rubbing a cat's fur the wrong way.

The Gurung party is slamming into high gear, and the news of our arrival has apparently made the rounds. All evening long, people stream in to join in the revels. It's great to kick back and listen. I study the inflection and try to figure out what they are talking about. I can pick out a few words - more than I expected - but not enough to follow the conversation.

Finally, I manage to put my unease into words. It's all about camaraderie: what the dictionary calls goodwill and lighthearted rapport between friends. Comradeship is one of the big attractions that drew me into backpacking in the first place, and it is clearly something the Gurungs are sharing tonight. But here in Nepal, it is something I will not have because I am the sahib; the Westerner with the money. It is their lot in life to suffer the indignities of taking the overpaid, overfed, pampered visitors into the mountains, and their reward is the bonhomie of an evening like this. My reward is that there is a crew to perform my labors, but whatever pleasure I find in this trek, I shall surely enjoy it in solitude.

I am delighted that Hark and Durga speak English; but neither speak it well enough to communicate meanings deeper than the physical realities of the trail. The panorama of the mountains fills the spirit with codas of courage and soaring fugues of immortality; but these play for me alone. It's like an inside joke: there's just no point in explaining it.

I lit a candle and read for a while, but every so often, I am brought back by a rumbling, gurgling or moaning from the livestock. At first, I gobble up the pages, but soon realize I will need to ration my reading material if it is to last me the week. I blew out the candle and drifted off to a deep sound sleep.

The sleep of the just.

The sleep of the utterly exhausted.