

## Culture? Wildlife? Shopping? - YES, THIS IS NEPAL



The mighty Himalayas form a stunning backdrop to every endeavour in Nepal. However, there is much more to this fabulous land than trekking and mountaineering. After working in Nepal as a trekking guide for ten years I recently took a turn around some of the less-visited regions.

I taxied over to my mate Sabin's house in the swanky suburb of Atma Gyang where he has built a beautifully-appointed three storey house, at a cost of around 500,000 dollars – which is 'a lot' by Nepali standards. Quite the self-made man; a 38 year old MBS graduate from Narayanghat, Chitwan. His wife made us breakfast – a huge daal bhat, Nepal's national dish, consisting of mild vegetable curry, rice, lentils and bright green spinach. It is considered bad form to refuse at least two helpings of everything. This was 9.30 am!!

While Sabin finished off 'a bit of work' in Thamel I grabbed a coffee at the Roadhouse (Kathmandu's best coffee) and bought a couple of cd's for the trip. Travelling the Prithvi Highway in a late model car with Alicia Keyes playing on a good sound system, the kilometres just flew by and we were soon at the Riverside Springs Resort for lunch, buying sweet local oranges from the roadside for desert.



Cheerful orange seller

The gorgeous valley from the highway to Chitwan was new territory for me. I was stunned at how beautiful it was. You would do this journey just for the scenery. Deep gorges cleft with jungle-clad valleys. We were at the Jungle Villa Resort just on dusk. I dined with Rudra and Sabin, who built the resort; they are so-o-o-o proud of their baby. The service in the lofty dining hall was superb and the balcony looks out over the river which you can hear though not see at night creating a mysterious atmosphere. I was in a deluxe bungalow, Elephant I, with an enormous bed, thoughtful ethnic touches in the decor and, best of all, my own back verandah where I could watch ducks and cranes fishing in the billabong behind the river. I met Sahodur the resident naturalist and made a date for 8 am for an elephant safari. Although these places are a bit expensive (\$240 per person for two nights) EVERYTHING is included.



Chasing rhinos through the jungle:

The elephant safari exceeded all expectations. Although we didn't see more than a tiger footprint in the mud our lovely female elephant shuddered quite violently and turned away trumpeting at one point. 'Unseen tiger' was the mahout's explanation. I figure he would know. We did get a bit too 'up close and personal' with two beautiful rhinos, chomping away in the depths of the luscious green forest. With the Sahodur standing behind the howdah whispering things like 'peacocks 8 o'clock' I was having the time of my life.

In the afternoon I went bird-watching with Sahodur. It was a bit freaky in the very long grass; from whence our rhinos came this morning! I listened carefully to Sahodur's instructions for rhino encounter but was still scared witless. Then the grassland opened up so that we had longer views. Plenty of time to plan our exit strategy should we meet the big beastie. I loved it once it was over and we did see a lot of birds which 'wonder boy' knew the Latin names of. Two gin and tonics (burrah-peg 60 ml) was probably one too many but much-needed after all that nervous bird-watching. I slept like a log.



‘Spotted deer at 9 o’clock’

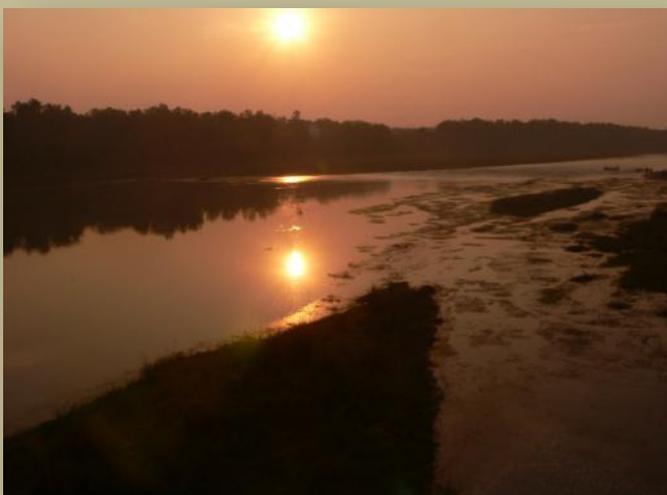
My car and driver (Suman) arrived, as promised at 11 am this morning. A gift from my trusty travel agent Deepak at Sahara Treks and Travels in Thamel. If you are going to drive across the dusty Terai for five hours to Lumbini then this is the way to go. We got held up behind a wedding procession at one stage but I leapt out of the car to take a few photos and got swept along with the beautiful dancing women.



I had a booking at the Buddha Maya Garden, the best hotel in Lumbini. It really was a bit too impressive and the snooty receptionist almost convinced me to try elsewhere. Then I saw the room. Heaven sent. Pale creamy tiles, subtle dark wood furnishings, white bed linen and upholstery, gauzy white curtains and a balcony overlooking a lotus pool. OK, I am in. Regular price is around \$80 but be warned, the rooms are much, much better than the service or the food! (They do have plans to fix things).



traffic on the elephant trail



Bird watching at dusk

I explored the little village of Lumbini Bazaar in fading light. After a cluster of backpackers lodges, which actually looked rather inviting, I found the old village of tiny Thora cottages. Thatched roofs, baby goats, and adorable kids on the hip of movie-star-looking mums. I ran the battery on my camera into the ground. Dinner at the Buddha Maya Garden – the less said the better. ‘No a la carte, no bar, buffet only madam’. The buffet had been trashed by about a hundred Taiwanese tourists. An alcohol-free night no doubt did me good. I slept in absolute luxury.



Luxury!





### The room – and the view

The temple complex at Lumbini is utterly charming. It is the birthplace of Lord Buddha in a beautifully-maintained park-like setting. I think I was expecting to feel something special. However, it was just a very lovely old bodhi tree with a few hundred happy holiday-makers snapping each other in front of everything. A brave group of Korean pilgrims in robes Issy Miyake would have been proud to design, chanted valiantly. The queue of 200 slow-moving people to see the 'actual spot' where Maya Devi gave birth to the baby Buddha didn't tempt me. I am sure that for devotees it is a deeper experience.

After a freshen-up and a cup of tea in my fabulous room, I borrowed a bicycle from a member of staff and pedalled all over the park full of temples. All the Buddhist countries of the world are vying with each other to build more beautiful replicas of their own famous temples. A canal cuts through the park which is several kilometres long. There were lots of school groups and a real carnival atmosphere. Cycle rickshaws were available and probably a better option on a warmer day.







Meeting the locals on a stroll around Lumbini Bazaar



Burma's contribution to Lumbini looks like it has been there for a thousand years.

Suman and the trusty Hyundai were ready to go at lunchtime and as we arrived at Butwal we were both ravenous and I badly needed a coffee, having rather foolishly rejected the Nescafe at breakfast this morning. Suman recommended the local branch of Nanglo Bakery but it had been taken over for a wedding. We crossed the road to the very downmarket Gurka Cafe and had one of the best daal bhats I can remember. An instant coffee (we all have to make compromises) fixed the caffeine withdrawal headache. I was stunned at what a metropolis Butwal is. I had never even heard of it till we arrived.

Immediately after lunch we drove up into hills and the rest of the drive was on winding, mountain roads. Tansen Palpa is a summer retreat for overheated Nepalis. Nothing really special except the location; but what a location. Strung across a saddle at 1900 metres with (so they tell me) stunning views of the Himalayas; possibly the widest view possible in the whole of Nepal. Sadly, it was completely cloudy. The food at the only decent hotel in town, The Srinagar, was fantastic. The Bouda Maya Garden should head-hunt this chef. The faded, old-fashioned, wood-panelled room was overpriced at \$30 but the shower was boiling hot and the TV reception was good. I played Hope Springs on DVD on my laptop with Meryl Street and Tommy Lee Jones. I laughed, and then I cried.

The scenery was fabulous today – again! Clusters of tiny thatched mud-walled cottages clinging to precipitous ridges with the mighty Kali Gandaki cutting a swathe through the landscape. The big bridge and proceeding switchbacks felt like a cartoon – too extreme to be real.



After four and half hours of swaying around corners I was very happy to arrive in Pokhara. I have known the Lake Diamond family here for twelve years and have a standing order for the upstairs corner room. Goodbye and thanks to

Suman then an afternoon spent catching up on my email sitting on the sunny terrace – back in Wi-Fi land. Thought I might cruise the shops this evening. Jewellery is lovely here, and funky clothes, and cashmere, and embroidered Indian shawls and Buddhist thanka paintings.....only one rule – bargain like hell! Or maybe I will go for a healing Ayurvedic massage.

Updating my notes at the Peace Plaza cafe in Lakeside. Soft lighting, Latin music, huge flat screen TV (on permanent mute), and a view over the lake from the rear. I am sitting on the street side to watch the passers- by. I am eating Chicken Sekuwa dish of grilled filets coated in salty spices and served with Nepali salad (sliced carrot, cucumber and radish). The gin and tonic is on a 'happy hour' two- for- one special. Sadly, I can't manage a second.

After a few slow, leisurely days in Pokhara – will I go out on the lake today or not – I rustled up some transport and headed back to Kathmandu. I got off the bus at the half-way point just outside Mugling. The Bandipur Mountain Resort sent a jeep down to get me. I'd had no luck getting a ride on any of the public jeeps unless I wanted to be one of the five people standing on the rear bumper, hanging on to the roof-rack. Bandipur is just 8 km from the main highway; straight up. This Newari village is a wonderful collection of architectural styles, well-preserved, and a delight to explore as there are no vehicles allowed through the town. My hotel was about ten minutes walk away from the main village, situated on a spectacular spur overlooking the valley below and the Himalayas beyond. When the clouds parted around 5.30 in the afternoon I was stunned – and the whole view was visible from my bed! There were not many other guests and between us we agreed that what we would like for dinner was 'what the staff is having'. It has taken me a while but I've finally figured out what is the best food in Nepal.



There was a bit of drama next day as I boarded a bus when the ticket boy yelled out 'Sauhara' because my friends at 'Sahara' were to pick me up. Somehow I found the right bus at Mugling (thanks for waiting for me guys).

I stay in a friendly little 'home stay' hotel in Kathmandu, Muna Cottage, so it is always a delight to be home. Kapan is not really a well-known tourist destination, which is probably why I like it. It is within walking distance of Bouda and has views of nearby hilltop monasteries and nobody selling anything for tourists. I can easily take a taxi into town for more serious shopping at Indra Chowk and Assan Thole for traditional handicrafts, spices or fabrics or the new Sherpa Mall at Durbar Marg for upmarket Nepali clothing. I like to come home to a quiet little suburb to sleep. I find the sound of duff-duff music and generators in Thamel a bit irritating – must be my age, I never used to notice that kind of thing.

Late November through to late February is the ideal time to get out and about in Nepal. On this kind of trip there is not enough altitude to worry about the cold and the lowlands at Chitwan and Lumbini are pleasantly mild. You can easily combine a tour like this with some time spent in the ancient sites of the Kathmandu Valley for a perfect holiday with no trekking at all. Of course a couple of half-day walks could spice up the trip.....



Cheers,

Teresa