

## TREK REPORT - NEPAL CULTURE SAFARI 2026



### February 19

Ekki and I flew in from Bangkok, a bit later than planned but immigration was a breeze. The customs guys were fixated on some tiny metal object in Ekki's bag; it turned out, after a deep dive, to be a miniature metal coach and horses, a small gift from Lou in Australia. We all had a good laugh.

Our guests, Peter and Heidi had already landed, been met by Deepak and whisked off to the International Guesthouse. As we drove into Kathmandu it was a little warmer than expected, but the smog makes 23 degrees feel warmer in the middle of the day.

After a few hours 'recovery' we dined in the beautifully lit garden of our hotel. Every corner has collections of antiques and architectural elements rescued from old houses. Daal Bhat was a new experience for the guests but a staple for Ekki and I.

### FEBRUARY 20

Easy first day. After breakfast in the garden, we strolled into nearby Thamel to see our friend Deepak in his shop. Deepak is very knowledgeable about singing bowls and spent ages showing Peter and Heidi his collection. Peter had a firm idea of what he wanted and they both chose some lovely things.

We were so engrossed we suddenly realised it was lunchtime. Rosemerry was not far and would take us on a different street to home. We spent a little time in Pilgrims Book Shop on the way. I do like that shop. A bit of time-out this afternoon, with new books, and then dinner at nearby Yangling, a brightly-lit Tibetan café over three small floors. The food is fantastic, momos of course, with a few local Gorka beers.

**FEBRUARY 21**

By 9 in was just warm enough for breakfast in the garden. We taxied to Bouda in a roomy, new EV. Very posh. The trip over was the usual 'Cooks Tour', but the driver took us all the way to the Café Utpala's entrance. Saturday is a small market and a huge Buffet. The salads were great, as was the Alu Saag (potato and spinach curry), mopped up with fresh naan bread.

A bit too warm after lunch we retreated to a rooftop bar overlooking the ancient stupa. The sun lowered and we ventured a couple of laps, , climbing up onto the first terrace for a wonderful perspective. Circling further, an exquisite garnet-coloured cashmere cardigan caught Heidi's eye. Meandering through the back lanes we soon found a taxi.....though not a patch on our earlier one!



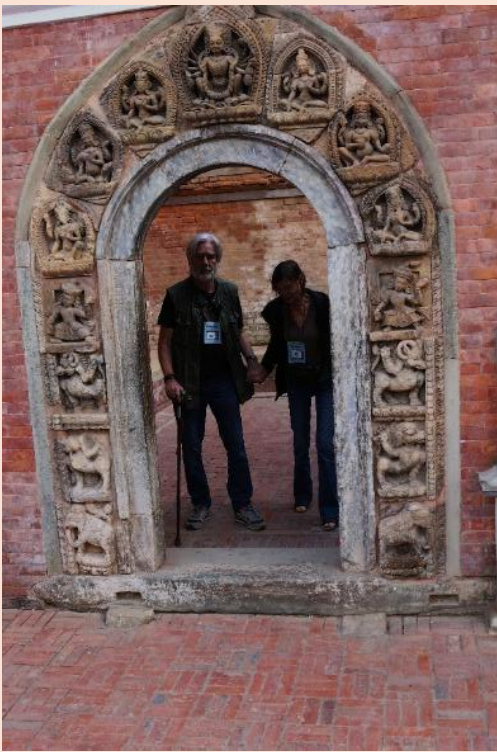
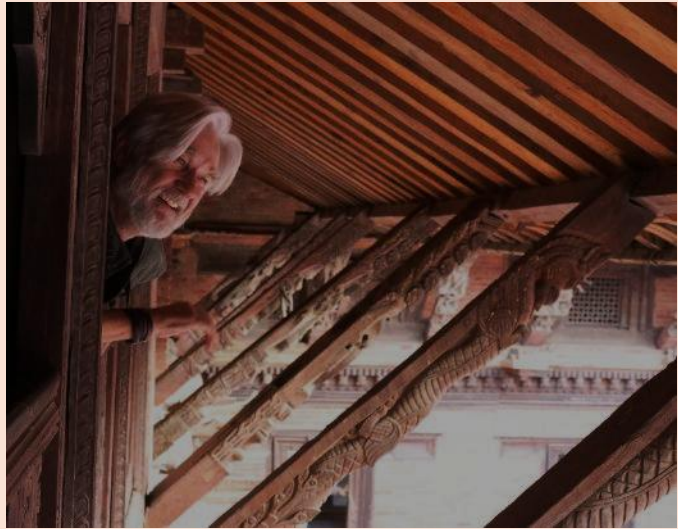
**FEBRUARY 22**

A quick trip into Thamel to drop off storage and find a shoulder bag for Peter. Great if he could carry his own pullover, camera, phone, etc. The Women's Development Community shop was perfect. Peter bought a bag the same as Ekki's and I confess I bought another one for myself too, and a purse. Resistance is useless. Really good quality, hand-woven cotton bags in great colours and styles.

A normal, slightly rusty, 15-year-old, malfunctioning windows, no seatbelts taxi took us to Pathan this afternoon. The crowd at Pathan Durbar Square was almost entirely Nepali. Lunch in the pretty courtyard of the museum was peaceful, though their dog did noisily chase off a monkey with the loss of a few roof tiles.

The museum stairs are a rather challenging design for those of us with mobility issues, so we only did one large gallery. Peering out of the latticed windows into the Princess' private courtyard is a treat. We meandered around the old architecture. There is a reason this square is on the World Heritage List. The winding backstreets led us, finally, to another battered banger of a taxi. Timing could have been better as we crept through the Kathmandu peak hour. Let's call it 'sightseeing'.

Dinner back at Yangling....it is nearby and the food is great.



## **FEBRUARY 23**

We entertained guests today in our hotel garden. . Julie, Netra and Sarmilla joined us four. Our simple order of Vegetable Pakora took over an hour but we made the most of the spring weather, sipping our fresh lemon sodas while we waited. Rain was forecast. None eventuated.

We all shopped a little this afternoon. Sun hats, light cotton shirts.....preparing ourselves for some seriously warm days to come.

## **FEBRUARY 24**

Kamal arrived early in the familiar dark blue Toyota Hi-Ace. A light breakfast for the road – takeaway coffee from Café Dahlia (excellent btw). All aboard and on the road ahead of schedule. Easy run to the rim of the Kathmandu Valley and some astonishing views from the van. Steep valleys fall away beside the road and the Middle Hills fold in endless blue-green waves into the distance. Big peaks not visible today. Our usual tea stop was closed but Kamal knew another, not far along the road, and it was a beauty, overlooking the Trisuli River. Clean toilets and then hot tea, with a hint of fresh ginger.

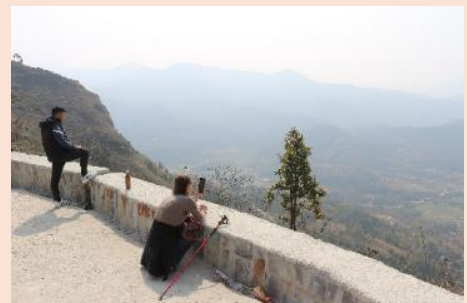
Lunch was Riverside Springs Resort. Alu Paratha was a much bigger amount than expected and served with big bowls of fresh-set yoghurt. The swimming pool here has been enlarged, and the gardens are beautiful.

I was amazed at the new stretches of road towards Bandipur. Two lanes in each direction, with lane markings!! Gorgeous rooms with great views. Sadly, it was cloudy. The Himalayas stayed hidden for the whole two days. We strolled into the village this evening, returning for the dinner included at our hotel.

## **February 25**

Ekki and Bharat took Heidi for a short trek up to the viewpoint this morning. I lay around reading and we met up in the village for samosas with yoghurt – this town is famous for both. My favourite weaving shop was open and we found a few treasures.

This evening we introduced Peter and Heidi to our favourite card game, Thirteen. Peter took to it quickly, though Heidi found it not quite so enthralling. Bharat soon took her place at the table and we played a few hilarious rounds. Slept well in the quiet fresh air.



## **FEBRUARY 26**

This morning Ekki, Heidi and I set out to walk part of the way down. That was 8.30, but by 10 am the van picked us up. It was a gorgeous morning and I admit, I was a bit sorry to see the van. Kamal knew a good place where we could sip our Americanos overlooking the Marshyangdi. Good call Kamal.



The road into Mugling and then south to the Terai is hugely improved and it was busy but plain sailing for us today. The river, which is still Trisuli, is now combined with the Marsyangdi. Despite this the water level is incredibly low with exposed rocks for much of its width. Winter has been, as usual here, a very dry season. No major rains expected before June. After the chaotic streets of Bharatpur we were whizzing through flat fields of green wheat and ripe yellow mustard. Farmers planted out paddy rice, ankle deep in water, while women strung up bean plants. The house colours are rather wonderful in this area and paint products are advertised heavily.

A warm welcome awaited us at Jungle Villa Resort. Our rooms look out directly onto the river. No wildlife yet but a superb lunch on a shady terrace. Walked into the local village at dusk. Super dinner in the massive, thatched roof dining hall. Happy campers!

## **FEBRUARY 27**

Setting off by van we soon arrived at a strangely kitsch canoe lookout point thronged with tourists. Quickly escaped to our own quiet boat. Peter, Ekki, Me, Sri Krishna (our naturalist) and a boatman to pole our dugout over the shallows. While the water was only knee-deep in places, the crocodiles lurking in the deeper waters were terrifying. A 4 metre Muggar swam under our boat at one stage and we saw others basking on the banks. Garial were more plentiful but harmless, as they only eat fish.

It was a dreamy trip, spotting dozens of bird species. A peacock put on a dazzling display for a nearby pea-hen, her chicks nearby. Cormorants, Ibis, ducks, geese, storks in abundance. The Common Kingfisher was a brilliant flash of turquoise. Sri Krishna was a classic ranger.....'Lesser Open-billed Egret...expert at crushing snails.'

Good timing at the Garial breeding station as we watched young crocs and cormorants vie with each other for the little silver fish the rangers had recently thrown into the cages. Brave birds! The garial are endangered, despite recent efforts. Adults released at age 4 or 5, about 3 metres long, but, mysteriously, they are mostly males.



The safari this afternoon was great, although we only saw one rhino at a distance of about 20 metres. Just bashing around in the jungle in an open jeep is my kind of fun and luckily it was not so hot or sunny. We saw rhesus macaques, spotted deer and a wild bore. We saw a metre-long monitor lizard on a tree trunk. Termite mounds a-plenty and deep holes dug with the very sharp claws of sloth bears. Eyes and ears open while having to pee in the bushes.

There was another female rhino with a youngster on the riverbank at dusk, just as we neared home but standing on the bridge gawping with a hundred other camera-clicking tourists held little appeal. Thanks here to Sunil, a great driver and rhino spotter.

We saw no tiger, though Ekki spent a magical hour during the night, listening to one calling in the nearby jungle. Its footprints were very clear in the soft sandy track, not a hundred metres from our room.

Dancing this evening, from the local Tharu community was brilliant, and yes, we joined them for the last number, followed by a delicious Nepali buffet. Warm enough to eat outside overlooking the moonlit river, with jungle noises for atmosphere.



Chitwan



## FEBRUARY 28

After a leisurely breakfast, no hurry to leave this place, Kamal picked us up in the trusty Hi-Ace and we sped off towards Lumbini. The fields were green with winter wheat and yellow with mustard flowers, there were grazing goats, the occasional buffalo and some flooded paddy fields. This was interspersed with pretty little villages of painted houses with flower filled gardens. The main road was dizzyingly busy with brightly coloured tuk tuks, oblivious cows, and women in traditional clothes – glittering saris and colourful kurta suruwal – not so much western dress here, particularly for women, though the youngsters do like their jeans and sportswear. It was quite warm and we had windows up and air-con on as we wound through the dusty roadworks in the hills. A quick pit-stop at a rather dreary café on the highest point, Coke and Potato Chips I recall, then on excellent new road all the way to the Lumbini turn off.

In Lumbini by 3 pm. Super hotel. Most businesses are closed for the elections and selling alcohol is forbidden. We found a little café willing to serve beers, discreetly, and we drank it in the garden, overlooked by a couple of cheeky monkeys, which were soon despatched by the owner with a well-aimed slingshot. I liked our spicy Nepali food tonight, but I fear the European food was a bit bland.



## MARCH 1

Today we rode with a Tuk Tuk to the Maya Devi Temple which we entered from the back gate and the original gompa. Special. There were not many visitors there, but those moving past the actual birthplace were Japanese pilgrims, singing very gently. Wonderful atmosphere and I had tears in my eyes as I came out into the sunshine. We mooched around under the gigantic Bhodi tree, meeting visitors from here and there. The family of three from Himachal Pradesh were particularly photogenic.

The temperature was almost 30 degrees as we headed out into the park, far too warm for a long round of visiting temples – so we chose a couple of beauties. We got a surprise at the German temple, which is in traditional Nepali style with exquisite craftsmanship. 60 or so monks chanted their prayers in response to a Rinpoche whose prayers were amplified. Magic. The Thai temple was tranquility itself. All white perfection. But it was hot and we did not linger.



Back at Five Elements, a hotel I would recommend, we were naughty and had huge plates of chips for lunch. Giving the ketchup a miss, I asked for local achar. It was superb. I could taste mustard, chilly and timur at least, freshly ground with garlic and tomatoes. The chips were excellent btw.

Under three hours, including a stop at a funky little café with a garden full of kitsch Hindu 'art' and marijuana, saw us pulling into Hotel Srinagar in Thansen Palpa. The Hotel has been modernised, again. Very posh, though I liked it in the old days with wood-panelled walls and old white marble bathrooms. We had a great night of good food and a game of Thirteen. We met 'M Poirot' and our waiter could not have been sweeter.

## MARCH 2

The customers had no interest in walking down through the town today, so we headed out after breakfast, which we ate on the terrace in the sun. There was no view of the Himalaya today, sadly, again.

Thansen Palpa was a riot of colour with spring flowers cascading out of every garden terrace but soon we were winding through vertiginous hills with green rivers at the bottom of very deep valleys. Nice and roomy with just four of us plus Kamal. What a driver. I think he does have a sixth sense about oncoming traffic and blind curves.

We stopped at a massive suspension bridge, to test our nerve and take a few photos. Kamal found us a café. We sometimes have to take what we can get on a long trip but this one had Café Americano!

Two hours to go but plenty to see. An astounding variety of painted houses, often themed. All pink in this town, all blue in the next one.

It was great to be back in Pokhara, though the famous mountain views were noticeably absent. Hotel Blue Planet is a treat and we love our rooms – ours for its turquoise colour scheme and tiny back balcony, Peter and Heidi for the very private terrace. A.M./P.M. for dinner. The Avocado Salad as good as we remembered. Kids on the street are streaked with colours after playing Holi all day. An early night after a drink on the terrace for four weary travellers.

A sad farewell to Kamal this evening – we FLY back to Kathmandu. Best driver in Nepal. If you are ever reading this and find yourself in need, contact Deepak at Sahara Nepal Treks and Travels in Thamel, he will fix it for you, and almost anything else for that matter.

### MARCH 3

A warm lazy day for everyone today. Breakfast was late and then we strolled about the shops, ending up at The German Bakery for a long lunch in their very pleasant garden. We taxied home and Peter and Heidi headed off for massages. They returned glowing and full of praise.

This evening Bharat guided our taxi to his house where he served us the best fried chicken ever, with chips and salad and beer and rum. What a feast. His old dad had folk music on the tv so we turned it up and danced in the courtyard. Added treat was a video call from Dang. Lahar, Layan and his mum, clearly having a very happy Holi indeed. I think our visitors enjoyed this glimpse of ordinary Nepali life.

### MARCH 4

An early start with a jeep up to the Peace Stupa for some early morning views. The stairs were a bit much but the coffee was excellent. Views were cloudy. Not to be deterred, we taxied back to town and got a country jeep up to Damphus, where the views are legendary. We had no better luck with the view. For about a minute it was possible to make out the edge of Anapurna 2 but that was all. However, the rural location was magic and the short walk in was very pretty. Lunch was at Pinnacle Lodge – checked the rooms. Would definitely recommend it.

The warm afternoon was very conducive to a siesta so we met at 5 for a small shopping excursion and dinner. The Thakali Kitchen had nothing on the menu which appealed to our guests so we decamped to Café Concerto. Italian. Nobody doesn't like Italian food, right. Bit expensive, by Nepali standards, but excellent food. I have had two large glasses of Pinot Grigio as I write this. Ready to turn on the overhead fan and the reading lamp and get back into Career of Evil, Kenneth Galbraith. Pilgrims Bookshop, Thamel, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, great choice!

### MARCH 5

Today is Election Day so absolutely NOTHING is happening. Almost everything is closed till later this evening. We sat around, dozing, reading and strolled out to dinner late. No hassle or problem with the election itself.



Deserted.....

### MARCH 6

Early taxi out to the new Pokhara International Airport. It was busy but earlier flights had been successful, so we were optimistic. Getting a flight on the day of your booking is never guaranteed in Nepal. Cloudy weather can halt all

flights because 'our clouds have rocks in them'. We boarded just an hour late, sat on the runway for half an hour but had a smooth flight till Kathmandu. Crowded runways below us meant circling, at high altitude, for about 45 minutes. Could have been a drag but we did get magnificent Himalayan views every time we circled.

Kamal was waiting with the blue Hi-Ace and quickly whizzed us the 8 kilometres to Bhaktapur. Planet Bhaktapur used to be a boarding school, and is set in pretty gardens, just outside the old city. Azaleas and Camelias are flowering, as are petunia, marigolds and stocks. There was even an Australian Callistemon, which seemed to attract the local birds. The rooms are spacious and the kitchen is trained in Italian cooking.

Dropped at the gate to the old city, we wandered rather randomly through narrow streets, past ancient temples and finally the magnificent pagoda of Nayatapolo. The taxi home was harder to find but the police were helpful and called me a GRAB (like Uber).



Bhaktapur





Not a taxi in sight when you want one....

Excellent dinner. Spinach Cannelloni for Ekki and I, Chicken sizzlers were a hit too.



**MARCH 7**

A slow breakfast – by design – having figured the skies might have cleared by 11. We drove to Nagarkot via the little tourist suspension bridge. The way down to the bridge was a bit further, and steeper, than we had imagined, but Heidi and I walked across. Returning, a lone male monkey glared menacingly and then nonchalantly crossed Ekki's path, not a metre away, without looking at him. Gutsy!



Onwards then to the lookout tower. Once again, nothing to see. Nada! Retreated to the super-posh Club Himalaya. We were led through a maze of corridors and a tiny lift to a brand new characterless terrace. Coffee and cakes were slow in coming, mediocre in quality and expensive. Must do better! Easy drive home but, never a dull moment.

Dinner at French Café tonight. Bouda, the owner, showed us videos of his son's wedding. He lives in Melbourne and married a Nepali nurse, from Melbourne. 500 guests. 3 days. 5 different outfits. OMG! OUR food was good tonight too.

### **MARCH 8**

Breakfast in the garden (we are back at the International Guesthouse in Paknajol) then taxi up to Swayambu. We just visited the huge new Buddha statues on the corner of the Ring Road. We watched a dozen or so tiny monkey kids playing a hysterical game of hide-and-seek all over the statues. Great entertainment. We walked, slowly, through the old street to Kimdol Bazaar and Bina's Silver Shop. Heidi had searched for some time for faceted garnet jewellery like her own ring. We found a perfectly matching pair of earrings and a pendant. Great to see Bina – it had been a while. Back to our old favourite Yangling tonight. Beer and Momos.

Three very big rhesus macaques in the tree by our balcony this evening. I am writing this with the door closed.



This guy and two mates were in the tree near our balcony this afternoon. I wrote this with the door closed!

## MARCH 9

Peter is a little unwell so Ekki and I took the opportunity to scoot over to Kapan this morning to sort out some of our stuff. We took Heidi to Pumpnickel. for lunch. I ordered the chicken pesto sandwich in baguette. A bit ambitious, better for two people really. Heidi and Ekki ordered 'light' Avocado Toast. It came with a large serve of scrambled eggs and fried potatoes.! We shopped with Heidi this afternoon, Nepali Clothing – a nice shirt for Peter – and the Button Shop where I set aside some bone hair pins and some costume jewellery.

Trying to upgrade Peter and Heidi's flight to Business Class as he is really unwell and it would be more comfortable. He rallied a little this evening and we dined in the garden on a yet another soft balmy evening....summer is on the way.

## MARCH 10

A huge last day, though not so much for Peter who is conserving his energy for the long flight home.

Singing bowls and gongs, cashmere cardigans and scarves, the shops here will part you with your money very quickly – resistance is useless! Around five, , in retrospect a bit late and crowded with peak hour jostling, Heidi, Ekki and I walked down to Assan Thole through the back lanes. We squeezed through Indra Chowk with its 16<sup>th</sup> Century shops full of glittering saris and copper pots and pans. Noisy. Crowded. Exciting. Heidi stocked up on Timur, Cardamon, Mountain Masala Curry mix, and several kinds of pepper.

It was dark as we walked home, with lights on we could see into the gloomy little shops with their blue-painted timber frames. Electrical, butcher, dingy momo cafes, some less than a metre wide. A man cranked a hand sewing machine on a ledge. This is my Nepal.



It was Peter's treat for dinner tonight so where better than The Roadhouse. Rucola salad, truffle mushroom pasta and delicious pizzas, washed down with Indian Chardonay. A nice touch. Thank you Peter.

## MARCH 11

Deepak came to say goodbye and Kamal was our lift to the airport of course. Farewell Peter and Heidi. Bon Voyage. Ramro sanga janus. I am sure Nepal surprised, delighted and sometimes shocked you. I hope the memories will stay with you forever. See you in Germany .....

Cheers.....Namaste....

Teresa and Ekki

