

Our last night in Thailand, travelling by Skytrain to Ekkamai two stops up from On-Nut Station just a few yards from our hotel, the short walk to Bourbon Street Restaurant took a few minutes. My was it busy, groups of people patiently standing outside waiting, we were immediately allocated an upstairs table there being only two of us. What a spread the restaurant had laid on, a feast – a buffet with US Thanksgiving Day offerings. We filled our boots with delicacies, turkey, oysters, muscles, BBQ ribs etc., sadly they had run out of Pecan Pie. We returned to our hotel, an early night for us, a 6am alarm call in order to pack and get ready in time for our taxi to the airport and our flight out of Bangkok.

Friday 29 November. The 10:30am Nepal Airways flight was on time arriving in Kathmandu at 12:30. Our seats reserved on the right-hand side of the plane in order to see the stunning Himalayas, the highest mountain range in Asia, separating the plains of the Indian subcontinent from the Tibetan plateau. Keith managed to get a great shot of a snow clad Everest and the planet's other prominent peaks. See the blog to view the image.
<http://www.rightwayround.net/>

I had arranged a transfer to our hotel, thank goodness. We were pounced on by all sorts trying to vie for our lift into the capital, everyone trying to make a living including the guy who loaded our luggage onto his trolley without our consent, wheeled it out to our booked transfer taxi - for a small consideration; with no Nepalese money in our wallets we could only give him a few baht. Our rough road to the hotel passed by what seemed to be an elongated boot sale, people selling goods/new and secondhand clothes spread out along the earthen banks on blankets. A stark reminder of folks trying to earn a crust in the third world. Countless groups of young men standing around hands in pockets with not a lot to do. Dusty narrow unkempt roads, loads of traffic all hootin' and tootin' their horns, and scooters weaving in and out. Women with babies in their arms on the street begging to buy milk from the shops for their infants. In the district of Thamel our hotel is squeezed in-between small supermarkets and open air terraced restaurants.

Kathmandu has the most advanced infrastructure of any urban area in Nepal. Thamel is the gateway to tourism and its nerve centre, the area itself is a huddle of narrow streets and small alleyways, a multitudinal hotchpotch of shops selling all sorts of goods - trekking apparel, knives of every description, loads of cashmere and yak woollen garments including scores of brightly coloured Pashmina scarves, sculpted masks of every design that you can imagine, an assortment of trinkets – rings, bracelets, necklaces, wall hangings, silks etc., a great place to buy individually designed Christmas presents if you had room to incorporate them into your luggage, although far more expensive than Thailand.

The city has a rich history spanning nearly 2,000 years as inferred from inscriptions found. Religious and cultural festivities form a major part of the lives of people residing in the city – most of which follow Hinduism with many others following Buddhism giving Kathmandu a cosmopolitan culture. We ventured out next day to visit the “Garden of Dreams”, rather smaller than we imagined, but still a quiet sanctuary away from the bustling traffic and folk outside. A

number of tourists from all over the world were enjoying the peace and tranquility that the gardens seem to ooze, they were either lazing on large green mats on the grassy areas or sitting on bench seats underneath arbors scattered around the well kept garden. The restaurant's menu was quite comprehensive although expensive, sadly our soup took over half an hour to arrive and was only just lukewarm, nearly £16 for two small portions. The prices here are far higher than we expected, a tiny can of Schweppes tonic over 60p (needed it to go with our Thai Gin!)

Sunday 1 December. Feeling quite energetic in the cooler temperatures of around 20-23°C (its cold in the shadows, quite a drop from 30°C+, I for one was feeling the cold), we walked the 5km or so to one of the famous major cultural attractions and UNESCO World Heritage Sites - Basantapur Durbar Palace, the whole complex known as Kathmandu Durbar Square, located in the heart of the ancient Kathmandu city.

The majority of the buildings here date from the 15th - 18th century and comprise of Hindu and Buddhist temples built in the pagoda style embellished with extremely fine intricately carved exteriors. The Square is made up of two sub areas with three loosely linked squares, the outer complex renowned for numerous interesting temples and plazas, whilst the inner complex comprises of the old palace, where the city's kings were crowned, and open courtyards. Besides the magnificent temples and shrines the area has other interesting aspects with cultural activities, traditions and festivals that the locals flock here to every year as they have for centuries.

We could have spent hours wandering the squares and watching the world go by from the terraced platforms, or darting into the many courtyards where idols and shrines could be glimpsed, but being weary from our long trek we opted to return to our hotel by taxi at around 4pm that afternoon. A beer and a sizzling steak dinner to be had, together with chatting to other foreign tourists enjoying their meals on the terrace.

Monday morning and we had an early breakfast and on our way by 8:30am, we were to be accompanied to the airport by Debendra, a Nepalese hotel worker who spoke good English, he was to help us with Customs as the bike had arrived in Kathmandu via Thai Airways. We had been advised by other travelling friends that fixers (agents) at the airport would expect to be paid between USD 50-100 to get the bike out. Keith wasn't prepared to hand over that amount of cash, so with the aid of Debendra we were hoping to pay far less.

What a frustrating and long day, Deb negotiated a good price with an agent, evidently we had to use them or the lengthy paperwork could not be completed without an agency number. The paperwork had been completed by around 1:30pm, the crate was dismantled and Keith started to put the bike back together, this would prove to be a really prolonged procedure, as it was quite dark in the customs area and trying to guide bolts through small holes was not easy, we didn't think to take a torch. With many a bystander to lift and haul the bike around, at around 4pm the mudguard and front wheel had been fitted, the handlebars raised, the bike manhandled

off the crate base and were able to walk it outside of the customs area. Keith connected the battery, but with a phut the black beastie decided not to start. We checked the fuses with no avail, Debendra phoned for a couple of mechanics who turned up in no time at all, they took charge and sorted out the starting problem, fitted the windscreen and indicators and made sure that we would get to our hotel in one piece. All was well and we headed back through the rush hour traffic collecting fuel as we went. We were to leave Hotel Access in Thamel on Tuesday and head for the Last Resort close to the Tibet border.

After sorting out a few bits and pieces on the bike, we headed out along the narrow streets lined with shops, the traffic quite busy with people walking, bikes and cars who continually honked their horns. As we slipped out of the city I spied slums, block built one roomed homes for families, quite depressing. All of the one and two storey buildings had corrugated metal roofs held down with large stones, some randomly scattered others placed meticulously in neat rows. As we rode into the mountains the air became colder and the roads twistier. Pot holes were in ever increasing numbers but nothing that couldn't be coped with. We climbed higher into the mountains then reached a plateau; we came across numerous brick manufacturing works with very tall conical chimneys blackened with soot at the narrow tops, the red bricks neatly stacked in building sized piles, then concrete works the blocks drying in the sun. We could see mountain ridges in the distance and beyond the sparkling snow capped Himalayas, they looked magnificent as the rigid peaks rose and fell, a never ending range.

We were heading for the "Last Resort" which includes a famous bungee jumping area, on top of a river gorge high in the mountains close to the Tibet border. The road becoming broken and sandy in places as we neared the resort, the off road course that Keith took earlier in the year paying dividends. A blue-green fast flowing river accompanied us twisting and turning, the cold water rippling and coursing through the rapids, over and around boulders, some as large as 20 ft high. Waterfalls cascaded down the mountain sides making its way to join the river in the valley below, the sun shining through the spray. What an utterly exhilarating ride along the valley floor then soaring up gaining altitude, the scenery entrancing, simply stunning, padi fields in narrow rows either side of us in huge waving steps as they rose high amongst the mountain slopes, the ingenuity of the locals to be complimented. On the lower slopes the padi now harvested and had vegetables planted in place of rice.

We left the bike in a gated off area and took to the long wobbly metal suspension bridge over the deep river gorge, luggage in tow. On the far side the buildings there constructed with perfectly cut creamy stone We were shown to our tented accommodation – was decidedly nippy at 4:30pm, we knew it would be quite cold later in the evening. The expensive tariff of 45 Euro each included a buffet dinner and breakfast, plus if we required the dreaded bungee jump. We were to retire early fully dressed underneath three duvets. Other "campers" decided that we needed loud music to help us to drift off to sleep, not that it was needed due to the thunderous roar of the River Bhotekoshi hundreds of feet below us.

The Last Resort offers various activities, including river rafting through the gorges, canyon

swinging, high rope courses etc. besides the bungee jumping, which takes place halfway along the metal suspension bridge, the river some 500 feet below. Somehow we just didn't fancy the drop. As we loaded the black beastie ready for our departure, a young Israeli guy called Magal pulled up on his bike, he had rocked up just to do a bungee jump and couldn't quite understand why we weren't joining in the fun.

Now Wednesday 4 December, we retraced our journey back towards Kathmandu, the buildings that we passed by were mainly multi-storey at least five floors high, built in red brick incorporating curved verandas and large terraces, the upper most terraces being reached by either metal spiral staircases, concrete steps or two branches with slats nailed across to make a ladder of sorts; clothes hanging from numerous washing lines strung between poles or draped over railings. In the countryside and small townships we were encountering cattle and goats just wandering along the verges, in ditches or on the roadways, the owners of some of these animals leading them to find new grazing areas. We stopped a few miles before we reached the city limits and booked into the very posh looking Mirabel Hotel, our room had a small veranda, from which could be seen the magnificent Himalayas sparkling and gleaming in the late afternoon sun. By 5:30pm the night had drawn in and we were in darkness.

On our way again next day, we were heading for Bandipur, a hilltop settlement in the Tanahu district; our journey through the mountains not straight forward, the roads were narrow, furrowed, pot-holed, rough and broken and just like the M6 at rush hour, slow heavily laden lorries and busy buses nose to tail, all determined to try to overtake anyone in front of them. We came across a long queue, we ducked and dived around the vehicles, some two abreast, after half an hour we arrived at the front of the queue and the reason for the hold up, a lorry had misjudged the width of the road its wheels had gone over and into the deep gutter and had shed its load behind. We felt lucky to be on the bike, the queue must have been over 3km long and would take hours to clear. Somehow the lorry would have to be craned out. We were now making reasonable time but once again held up with yet another queue. We darted around the parked vehicles until we could see in front of us a huge crowd of people, the road had large stones and boulders placed across it so that no one could pass through. These were moved for us and we soon found out why the road was blocked. There had been a terrible accident I could see the remains of a gnarled black bike and two bodies, the remainder of the ride to Bandipur a somber affair.

Have a great day