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TRAVERSE 90



A MAD MAX ADVENTURE



Shiva, Karma, the Himalayas, Mount Everest, prayer flags, and yaks ... all words and images that come to mind for the new and returning visitor to Nepal, that unique mountain kingdom, buried between the countries of India and Tibet.

Nepal has had a challenging history, within its borders and with its immediate neighbours. Internal political issues ended with the overthrow, and assassination, of the royal family in 2001. Then another blow to the national well-being occurred in an unfortunate chapter in the kingdom's history, the devastating earthquakes of 2015, where 9,000 people were killed and 22,000 injured.

The quake with a magnitude of 7.8 leveled many historical and religious locations. These catastrophic events had a devastating toll, both physically and to the psyche of this special place on Earth.

Sandwiched between the two his-

torically contentious countries, Nepal has had a protracted history of moving borders and the artificial separation of thousands of years of culture, religion, and people.

After a trip over twenty years ago during the turn of the millennium, I returned twice in as many years to ride the Himalayas on a motorcycle. The motorcycle, due to its inherent physical vulnerability, helped to bring me close to nature, the elements and, ultimately, to the people who, from previous explorations, were deep in my mind. These people make the country what it is – only added to by the natural beauty and the ingrained spirituality that permeates every Nepali saying and action.

All trips start with the love-hate relationship of Kathmandu. The old section of the city is a maze of small streets filled with Hindu and Buddhist shrines and at times the road is built around a very small, ancient, sacred spot that is almost invisible to the



Western eye.

Frenetic comes to mind! Once one exits the doors of the international airport, the adventure begins with touts, taxis, busses, horns, smoke, car exhaust, and constant movement; all to complement the sensory overload and begin your journey accordingly. Whisked away by taxi from the airport, the average tourist arrives in, or near, the Thamel area due primarily to the availability of goods and services. This area became famous in the 1960s with the overland Hippy Trail and the traveller vibe has remained to this day, although most of the Western hippies are now gone.

There are vendors throughout Kathmandu renting motorcycles – but to make this an authentic experience, I opted for the Royal Enfield. The company, originally from England, started producing motorcycles in 1901. After production ended in England, India continued producing the Bullet model under the name of

Enfield Bullet until legal issues were resolved and India assumed the official name of Royal Enfield, now 100% controlled by the Indian conglomerate Eicher.

Knowing that I was riding two-up, I opted for the 500cc, fuel injected model, with some very primitive racks to help hold the gear of two people. Not that I was looking for performance, but taking on two-up riding through the possibly treacherous mountain roads, and some limited gear, necessitated a larger frame and perhaps greater performance. The term performance has to be taken with a grain of salt due to the primitive technology of the Royal Enfield, but one I would come to rely on for my transportation between villages throughout the country for the weeks that were yet to unfold.

The Kathmandu Valley is not to be missed, although the pervasive hecticness gives no rest to the weary. Despite many of the famous religious

sites being leveled by the recent earthquake, several physical sites remain, even in the rubble the spirituality has never vanished.

Kathmandu Durbar Square, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is a very close walk to the Thamel region. The Square is built in front of the former royal palace of the Kathmandu Kingdom, one of three Durbar Squares in the Kathmandu Valley, housing the palaces of the Shah and Malla kings. Standing there, you can envision the once powerful kingdom even though many of the sites are a pile of bricks and stones or propped up with wooden reinforcements. The vision is one of the powerful past kingdoms and rebuilding the future to honor these fallen icons of the past. There is no doubt that Nepal, with some international assistance, will rebuild and recover from the devastation.

Exiting Kathmandu was akin to being an actor in one of the Mad Max movies, but this was no movie set.



Direction of travel appears to be optional, police attempting to navigate traffic, at times raw sewage creating a wet roadway and pungent smell, potholes seemingly designed to seek and destroy the front wheel of the motorcycle, and all the regular sights and sounds of Kathmandu – on steroids during rush-hour, which seems to permeate most of the day.

Finally clearing the Valley at the rim and combining with other travel partners who opted to miss the exciting fray of Kathmandu Valley, we all loaded up for the little-known back road, without the truck traffic coming from India on the main road, to the Chitwan National Park. A new lesson – perfectly good roads can change into absolute rubble in very short order. The road chosen was one of those that would be better to be dirt than the pock-marked, random checkerboard, pattern of what was once a good road. It was hard to believe I blasted down this road just







two years prior at full speed of the Enfield, only now the average speed was only 20 kilometres per hour, maximum.

Slowing down had a delightful, and unintended, effect. We were able to stop often and visit the vendors, see the local women sitting down and washing their beautiful hair in the waterfalls at the side of the road, the local school children riding atop of the busses, agriculture on the steep hillsides in action, and the movement of people all over without the interruption of the large trucks and busses on the main road. Peaceful riding on an absolutely, horribly maintained road. After about three times the amount of time I estimated this day, we finally arrived at the town of Sauraha and met up with another riding companion – who wisely took the traditionally-busy road and arrived much earlier! Regardless, we were all happy to safely emerge the Mad Max section and arrive to the serene Chit-

wan National Park, another UNESCO World Heritage site!

One never knows exactly what hotel will emerge, which was pre-booked, especially in a developing country, until seeing it with your own eyes. Well beyond my expectations! We had the corner room right on the edge of the National Park – the only thing dividing the hotel room and the park was the river that flowed between.

The banks of the river hosted all of the traditional flora and fauna, including crocodiles and elephants, easily in sight from the porch.

The first day there, I was feeling a bit scruffy, so indulged in a local haircut – one of my trademark travel experiences. Without any language exchanged, the barber went to work, including the upgraded neck, shoulder, and head massage. Upon completion of both, I was a bit surprised when I opened my eyes to find out the barber was on to the next custom-

er and my massage was taken over by his son!

All good fun! My friends told me that my new haircut made me look like Sting – my name for the remainder of the trip.

Boarding the traditional dug-out canoe, we were quickly whisked across the crocodile-infested waters to the entrance to the park. Walking and jeep tours are all available, all with a guide present to not only highlight the flora and fauna, but to also protect the animals from visitors, including poachers. There is a wide range of animals in the dense jungles and grasslands, including one of the last natural refuges for the illusive Royal Bengal Tiger and the Single-horned Asiatic Rhinoceros. The park rangers are atop of police elephants with automatic weapons to protect things – it was a first for me to see this mode of transportation for the rangers.

By way of the ancient town of



Tansen, we arrived in the lakeside town of Pokhara, on the edge of the scenic Phewa Lake. Most treks to the Annapurna Mountains, including the Annapurna Circuit, start in this town as it is close-by and is filled with tourist goods and services. The backdrop of Pokhara, on a clear day, is the famed Annapurna Range with three of the world's ten highest mountains, including: Dhaulagiri, Annapurna I, and Manaslu.

From here, we would gear up for the off-road section of the travels. Another travelling partner hired a motorcycle here – and this was a special addition as he was the third hiking partner of twenty years ago – and all three of us were together again to forge ahead, but this time all on motorcycles and twenty years later – quite special indeed!

Rain and fog often shroud the view of the Himalayas, but when it opens, it is breathtaking seeing to the Top of the World! And off we went.

The Annapurna Circuit was formally for trekking only – with no vehicle traffic as there was no road, only a foot path. It is now open to traffic all the way from Pokhara to Muktinath, but not over the Thorong La Pass. The road can change dramatically from dry to wet. Even though we had the best laid plans, the weather did not quite agree! What was a few days earlier a hard-packed road was now full of landslides being actively cleared and deeply rutted roads that were nearly impossible to navigate. At times, the mud was over 40 centimetres deep, which would be easily navigated on a motocross bike but not quite the same on a street-tyred Royal Enfield with two passengers.

We used the truck ruts to get some traction until the frame and engine bottomed-out into the mud – then it was hard paddling with our legs. Even the locals on motorcycles were turning around to try the roads another day. We persevered.

We progressed up in elevation, slip-sliding along through the villages of Kushma to Baglung to Ghorepani and then to Tatopani. As I rode the Royal Enfield past hikers, I have to admit that it was a bit disheartening – as I had been one of those hikers in the past and I felt like I was intruding on their solitude. Regardless, I was one of the quiet ones compared to the loads of tourist making their way to holy Muktinath on large busses.

The weather cleared a little. It was surprising how quickly the mud changed back into harder dirt.

Moving on from Tatopani (elevation of 3210 metres), we made our way up the very scenic mountain road toward Kagbeni and then to the Holy City of Muktinath. Located here is a sacred Vishnu temple, sacred to both Hindus and Buddhists alike. It is located at the base of the Thorong La Pass in the Lower Mustang region. It is also home to one of the world's highest temples at 3800 metres.



Hundreds of tourist from Nepal and India were visiting this special place; one which would not be accessible to many if the road was not built – that balancing act of progress and keeping things pristine and untouched.

Pressing on up the mountains through a loose-rock outcrop and moving into the Upper Mustang area, I found out the motorcycle did not have the correct carburation air-fuel mixture to continue in the thin air of this elevation, but this was my final stop I had planned as the next area required special permits.

Returning down the mountain, revisiting the same villages, provided time to reflect on the changes, and how the people are coping with them. I have now visited all the same villages on foot as well as motorcycle – so I do have a sense of comparison. The intrusion of roads, anywhere in the world, impacts so much of the once limited-accessibility in the



world – bringing with it both positive and negatives.

In Tatopani, I spoke with the owner of the guesthouse - the same I had stayed at twenty years earlier. It was here that I had a discussion about progress, development, and access into the former secluded villages along this route to sacred Muktinath.

As with all roads, access to remote areas is a doubled-edged sword. On the one hand, it brings the tourist economy closer to the locals. It also provides faster access to goods, services, schooling, and medicine to the people. The owner, a multi-generational native, was in favor of the progress and felt it was good for business, community and the people. Perhaps our western view is limited and judgmental. This was one road that appeared to have been built more for local access on Nepalese and Indian people than the access of outside tourist.

On the way back to Kathmandu, I

called upon the town of Gorkha, the ancient ancestral home to the Shah Dynasty and home to famous Gurkhas (or Gorkhas) soldiers.

These soldiers, combined with others from India, were recruited for the British, Nepalese, Indian armies, and UN peacekeeping missions. Although it appears that this is a bygone era, it was of historical significance to me. The town's main square is Gorkha Durbar, which contains a fort, a palace, and a temple, with a great deal of damage from the earthquakes, and a wonderful view of the Manaslu Mountain Range. Although I did not see any Gurkhas in action, I have the mental vision of their brave and committed service of which legends are made.

The final day into Kathmandu Valley was as eventful as the first. Gone were the quiet nights and days of the Annapurna Mountains. The Mad Max movie replay started even earlier as kilometres of backed-up



traffic lead up the mountain before entering the Valley.

I must have passed, literally, thousands of cars, trucks, and busses making my way through the maze of this epic traffic jam as it made Kathmandu Valley seem a bit calm in comparison. There is no way to describe the mass of cars and busses passing within zero tolerances just 'filling in' any hole possible, to make it up or down the mountain – simply insane. We all felt very fortunate to make it back unscathed!

Back to Thamel and the predictable pattern of lodging and food I had come to expect. Upon liftoff out of the Valley, I was sad to leave the new and old friends, the ancient culture and civilization, and the new possibilities. I know that I will return soon to the Mountain of the Gods!

As a traveller and explorer, I often wonder what impact I can provide that will have a lasting significance. As a college professor of education,

I tend to seek out and connect with schools along the way. I met up with a man of high ethics, values, and a firm commitment to the people of Nepal. Mr. Cholendra Karki and I visited the school he has started and saw, firsthand, the good that has come from his efforts in providing a quality education to the youth of Nepal. His non-profit organization also provides medical care and other services to the poor in Nepal. This organisation is the 'real deal'. You can visit the website to learn more: <https://www.aidfornepal.org.np/> **CF**

Chris Foster is a college professor working with the California State University and has ridden around the world on many epic motorcycle trips as well as boat travel. He lives in the small beach community of Leucadia in San Diego County, California.

Chris has circumnavigated the globe by sea, hitting all seven continents; ridden from

the tip of South America to the top of North America to the Arctic Sea in Alaska; and circumnavigated the globe from east to west by motorcycle, stopping only for the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

Chris completed his Kapp2Cape Exploration: motorcycling from Nordkapp, Norway to Cape Town, South Africa last year and then went to Nepal a few months ago.

Chris is looking forward setting a Guinness World Record in the summer of 2019 on his motorcycle – stay tuned! Keep up with him through Instagram at [planetearthquest](https://www.instagram.com/planetearthquest) or his website: www.planetearthquest.com

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