

VISITING NEPAL IN 1976

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I recently enjoyed Agnieszka Sobocinska's 2014 book Visiting the Neighbours: Australians in Asia, which explores Australians' travel experiences in Asia over a long period. She gives much attention to the 1960s and 1970s with the small country of Nepal looming quite large in her discussion. Deep in the spectacular Himalayas, it appeared during that period to offer Australian visitors rich Buddhist and Hindu spiritual traditions that powerfully contrasted with their lives at home. Nepal was a key component of what was widely known as the 'Hippie Trail'. Young Australians travelled on the 'magic buses' between the Nepalese capital of Kathmandu and Amsterdam or London, a journey that is impossible today. Some Nepalese monasteries became tourist destinations. Despite the tourist influx, even by the late 1970s the world's only Hindu kingdom (it became a republic in 2008) remained largely untouched by many western influences. Much of the country was inaccessible to tourists and modern tourism infrastructure only existed in a few areas.

What I knew of Nepal's dramatic scenery and cultural distinctiveness made me decide to visit for a week during early February 1976. I arranged my journey as part of a three week Cathay Pacific package that also included Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand. The package was excellent value. It covered air and ground travel, accommodation in good hotels and some local tours. For the latter, unlike the other countries I visited, I always had my own driver and guide in Nepal.

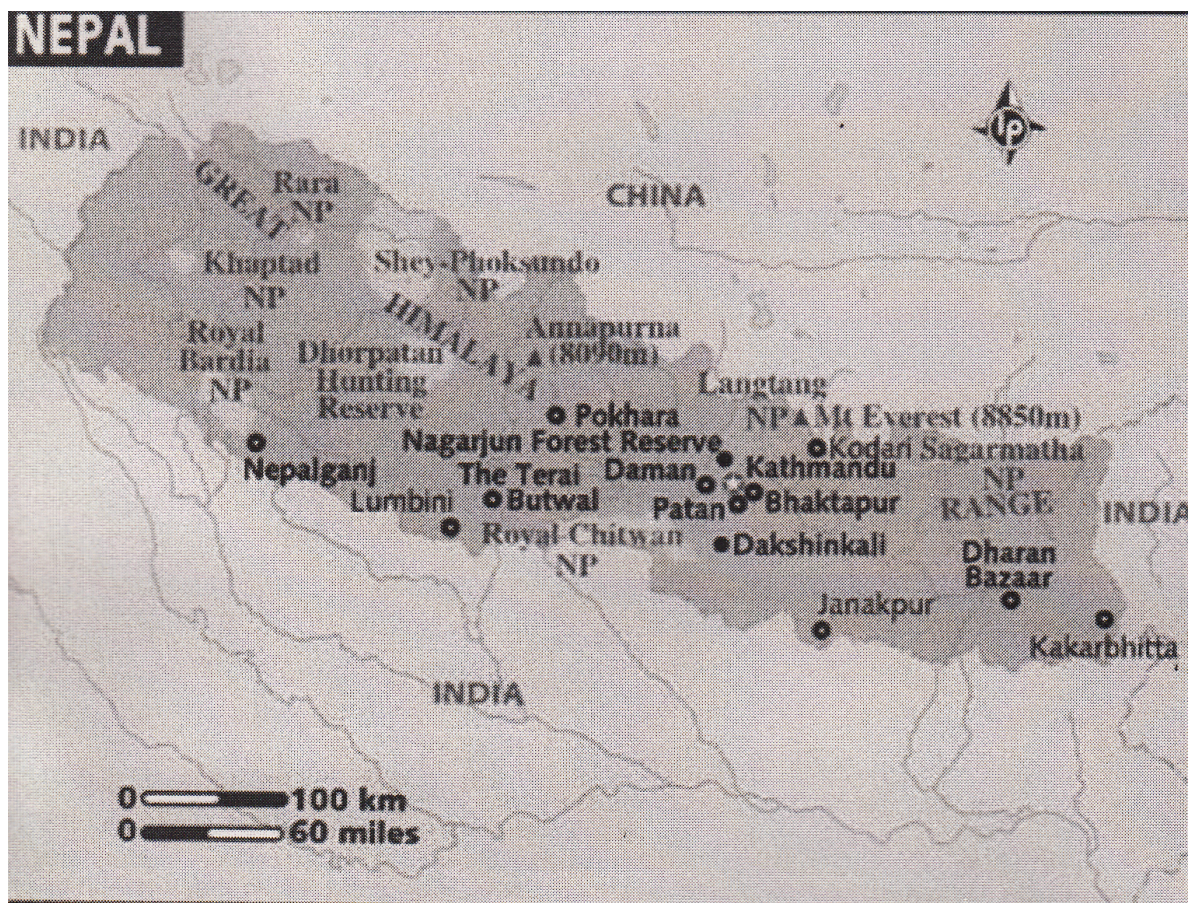
While I was travelling I wrote diary letters to my parents, which I found after my father's death in 2007. These are reproduced below with only very minor editorial adjustments. Current spellings of place names are used in most cases. Also reproduced is a selection of my photos.

At the time of my journey I was 26 years old and living in Perth, Western Australia, where I was a Temporary Lecturer in History at The University of Western

Australian. My parents, Diana and Maxwell Carment, lived in Burradoo (near Bowral), New South Wales.

Although I prepared myself for the visit through quite wide reading and discussions with people who had previously been to Nepal, I had never before travelled outside Australia and New Zealand and thus had no first hand experience of the third world. I knew that Nepal was one of the world's poorest countries but, as my first letter indicates, was completely unprepared for my initial observations of poverty there.

I do not claim any particular historical significance for the letters and photos but they may be of interest as one young Australian's impressions of Nepal almost four decades ago.



(Lonely Planet)

In flight from Bangkok to Kathmandu

7 February 1976

I arrived at Bangkok airport yesterday morning after an excellent Cathay Pacific flight from Singapore. Once at Bangkok, after waiting for some hours at the airport, I learned that Roy Nepal Airlines one (that's right, the only one) international aeroplane was delayed in Kathmandu by fog. RNA booked myself and the other passengers into a Bangkok hotel for the night. I did not sleep well as the hotel was on a very busy road. The traffic noise combined with that of a very vociferous air conditioner made sleep hard work.

I am, at last, on the plane. It took off from Bangkok at 8.20 this morning. The passengers are a rather odd combination – a lot of Nepalese going home, a group of rather husky looking travellers from various western countries, a number of Tibetans resident in Kathmandu since their revolt against the Chinese in 1959, a few ordinary tourists like myself and a couple of British people who live in Nepal. *[The long wait at Bangkok airport gave me the opportunity to observe my fellow passengers quite closely.]* At present we are flying over Burma. The country below is thickly forested.

Hotel Shanker, Kathmandu

7 February 1976

Not long after I last wrote we crossed the Bay of Bengal and flew over Calcutta. The visibility was perfect. The best moment, and one of quite unsurpassed beauty, came when we first saw the Himalayas. Everest, Annapurna and a host of other peaks suddenly appeared. We then flew down into the Kathmandu Valley and landed.

It was from this point onwards that I realised that I was entering a totally different world. The customs and passport procedures at the airport were almost non-existent. Confusion reigned supreme. Once I was through customs I was met and taken to my hotel. Because of the flight delay I was put into the Shanker instead of the Soaltee. The Shanker is a marvellous place. It is a former palace of the Rana family, which provided Nepal with hereditary prime ministers for over one hundred years until the

King seized effective power in 1952. It is an imposing white building. Its Italian renaissance design is in odd contrast to most other buildings in the city.

After lunch in the grand dining room I was taken on a road tour of the city. It was a fascinating and, at the same time, horrifying experience. For most Nepalese life has not changed much at all in the last thousand years. Most Kathmandu buildings are hundreds of years old. Everywhere there are Hindu and Buddhist temples and everywhere you can see the distant Himalayas rising above the valley. The streets are in most cases narrow, only just wide enough to hold a car. There are, in fact, very few cars about. Instead the streets are filled with people, very few of whom wear western clothes. The sacred cows also have a complete run of the place, as do chooks, dogs and hundreds of maimed, deformed and sick beggars. Everywhere I saw people with crippled limbs and hideous skin diseases, also the blind and those who suffered from a multitude of other afflictions. Everywhere there is filth and dirt. Yet at the same time the colour and variety is amazing – holy men from India with their long beards, Tibetans in their distinctive national costumes, and Tibetan monks in their scarlet robes and with their prayer wheels.

For a tourist the place has much to offer. But my overall feeling was revulsion that a society such as this still existed. I saw, for example, a tumble down house where hundreds of old people had been dumped to die. The stench and dirt were awful. Even for those people who are well life apparently has little to offer. Most live in tiny rooms with ceilings no more than five feet above the floors. There is no running water and, in most cases, no electricity. Half the adult population is unemployed. Only about 15 per cent are literate. Medical services for the masses are almost non-existent. I saw very few schools.

The other striking feature of Nepalese society that partly explains all this is religion. There are, as mentioned, thousands of Buddhist and Hindu temples. My part-Tibetan guide belonged to both religions and saw no contradiction in his position. Nepal is Buddha's birthplace. It is also the home of many Hindu gods, including the Lord Shiva. My guide rationalised the poverty and everything else in terms of the gods deciding people's fates. Little anyone did, he explained, could change the state of things.

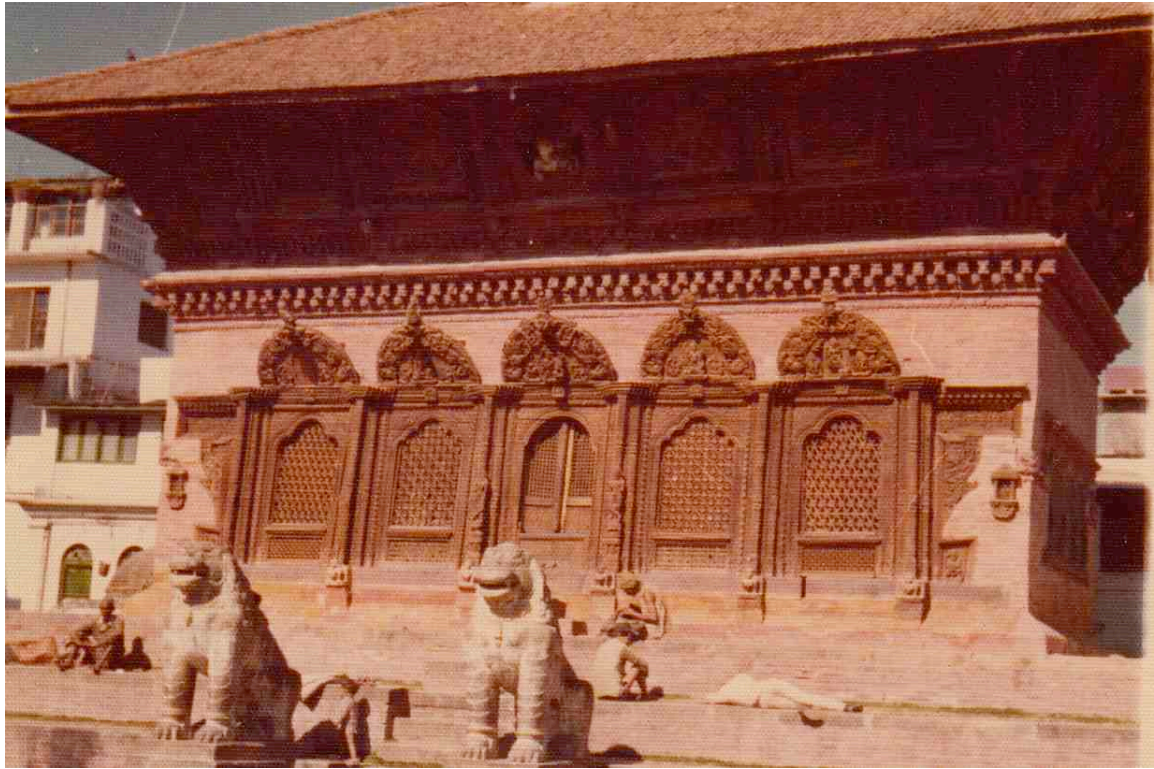
If any place is in need of a revolution it is Nepal – not a Communist revolution but one that can preserve at least some of the colour and diversity of life here and at the same time attend to the evils.



Distant view of the Himalayas from my aeroplane.



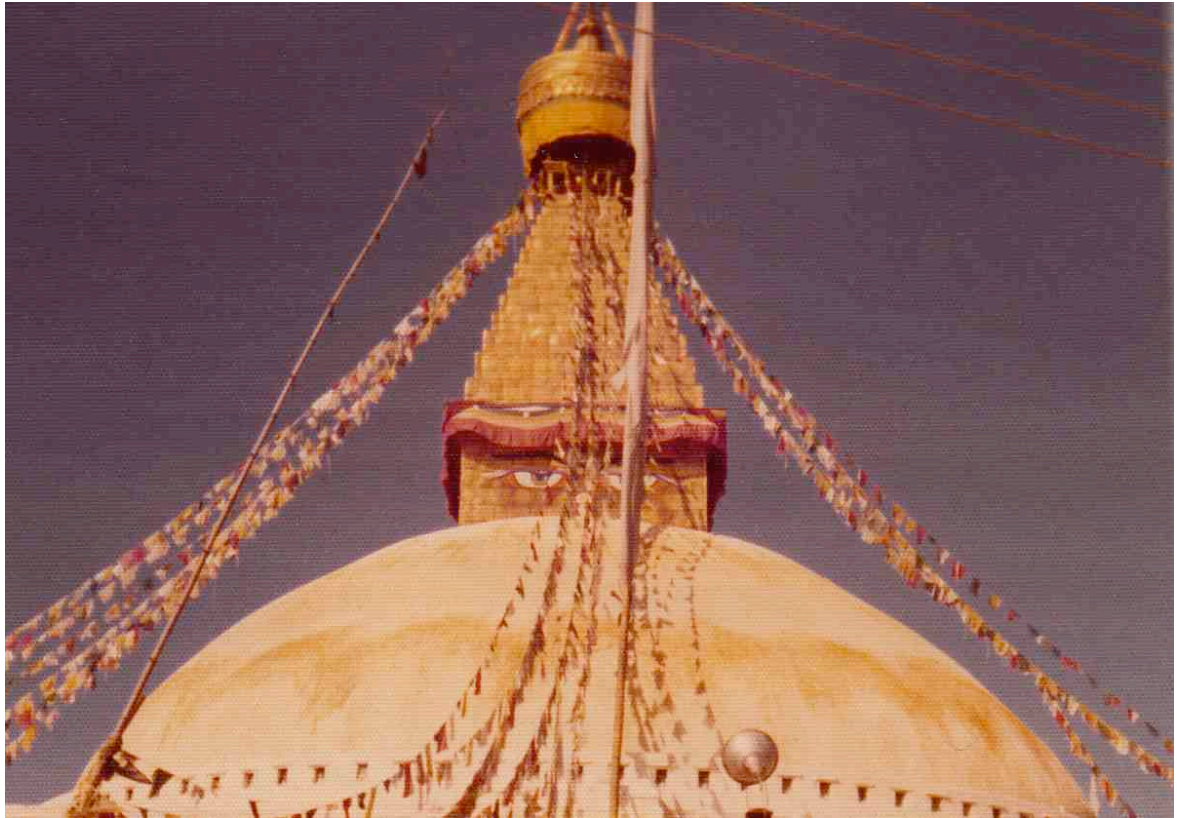
Hotel Shanker, Kathmandu.



Hindu temple, Kathmandu.



Hindu god of terror, Kathmandu.



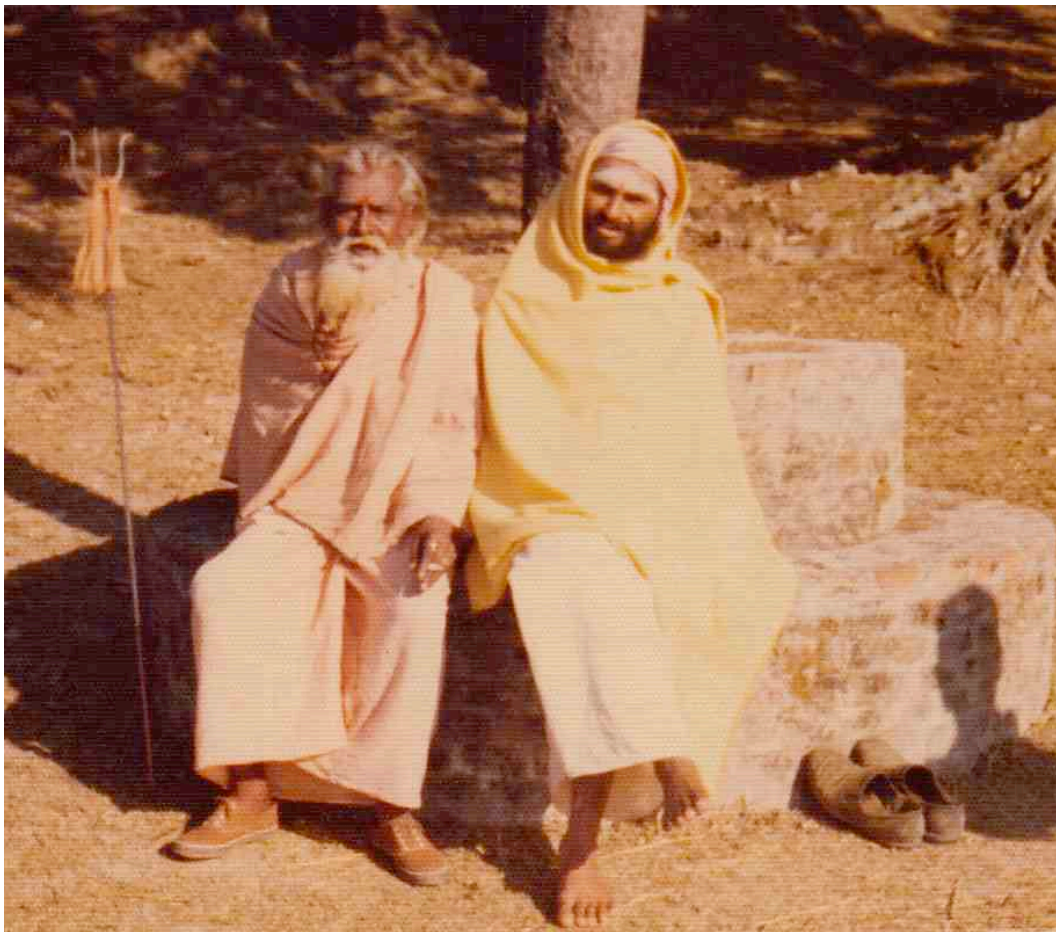
Boudha Stupa, Kathmandu.



Tibetan monks, Kathmandu.



Washing clothes, Kathmandu.



Indian holy men, Kathmandu.

Hotel Soaltee, Kathmandu

9 February 1976

Yesterday I left Kathmandu by aircraft for Meghauli in the country's south. The plane was small and did not fly very far above the ground. As a result we had the most wonderful views.

On our arrival at Meghauli, a small village on the Terai Plain, we were met by a representative from the Tiger Tops Hotel who took our luggage. Myself and the other hotel guests – an English couple from Hong Kong, an American from Bangkok and another English woman – were then all put on elephants. For each elephant there were two passengers sitting on a saddle and the mahout or driver. We thus began our fascinating journey to the hotel through the Royal Chitwan National Park. The vegetation was beautiful. We crossed a couple of wide rivers. We saw deer, crocodiles, many different birds and some rhinoceros. We came across one rhinoceros in long grass and my mahout made the elephant chase it. It was quite a ride. I had no idea that an elephant could be quite so nimble. In the end we forced the rhino to stop beside a river.

After about three and a half hours we arrived at the hotel. It is beside a river in the middle of quite dense forest. The bedrooms are on stilts and there is a large dining/sitting room in the centre. There is no electricity, as a generator would disturb the wild animals. Instead lamps are used and there is solar hot water. The bedrooms are very large and comfortable, with thick quilts on the beds. On our arrival we had tea and not long afterwards were told that a leopard had been attracted to bait set not far from the hotel. We crept along a narrow path and got a perfect view of the leopard from a specially constructed blind.

That night we were served a superb meal. We then sat chatting around an open fire. It was very cold when I got to bed but the bed itself was nicely warm as a result of a hotel hot water bottle that was placed there.

On the next morning we had an excellent breakfast. We then watched the elephants eating their breakfast. Elephants are remarkable creatures. They live to about 65 years

old. Each normally has one mahout who grows up with it. They are very obedient to their mahouts.

We then again boarded the elephants. On this occasion I was the only passenger on my elephant. We set off into the forest and saw a variety of wildlife though, unfortunately, no tigers.

After some hours we got back to the airport. The plane, like most things in Nepal, was not on time. While waiting at the airport I had an interesting chat to an Australian couple that have lived in Kathmandu for a year. The husband was advising the Nepalese civil aviation authorities.

On arriving at Kathmandu I was taken to my hotel – the Soaltee. It is supposed to be the best in Kathmandu, being owned by the King's uncle. It does not, however, have as much character as the Shanker.



Crossing a river, Royal Chitwan National Park.



Rhinoceros viewed from my elephant, Royal Chitwan National Park.



Tiger Tops Hotel, Royal Chitwan National Park.

Hotel Soaltee, Kathmandu

10 February 1976

I got up quite early this morning and was taken to the airport. Once there I boarded the STOL [*short take off and landing*] aeroplane that flies between Kathmandu and Syangboche, a little settlement some 13,000 feet up in the Himalayas. The plane and pilot were both Swiss. Swiss pilots are used for all the mountain flights, a great bone of contention for the Nepalese pilots, all of whom are trained in the United States and France but receive much lower salaries. The flight was most spectacular. I saw all the main Himalayan peaks, including Mount Everest. Especially prominent were Gauri Shankar, Thamserku and Ama Dablam. To land we had to fly through a narrow pass and on to a tiny airstrip surrounded by snow. The plane stayed there for about 20 minutes. It was very cold indeed but well worth the stop. I walked to the end of the flat ground and took pictures. On the return journey we went over the famous Tengboche Lamaist monastery, from which most of the Everest expeditions have begun their journeys.

After lunch in Kathmandu I was taken to see Patan, an ancient city situated three miles away. One of the original principalities of the Kathmandu Valley, its history goes back 2000 years. Today it is considered Nepal's artistic capital. Its narrow winding streets are lined with elaborately decorated pagodas, beautiful woodcarvings and ornate temples and shrines. While there I visited a Tibetan refugee camp. Auntie Marion [*my aunt Marion Wood, who spun wool*] would have been fascinated as there dozens of women spinning their own wool and making attractive rugs and other woollen goods. I bought a Lamaist wall plaque, a prayer wheel, a thick woollen jumper and some small trinkets.

On my return from Patan, I stopped off at Kathmandu's Swayambhunath temple. Said to be built 2500 years ago, it is one of the world's oldest Buddhist buildings. The main structure is of brick and earth, supporting a gold capped conical spire. It is on quite a high hill and covered with monkeys. Hippies call it 'the monkey temple'. While there my guide showed me into a monastery where lamas were sitting in a room chanting prayers. They sometimes do so for hours on end. Among them was a

young American boy whose parents sent him there for a couple of years. I felt sorry for him.



Flying to Syangboche.



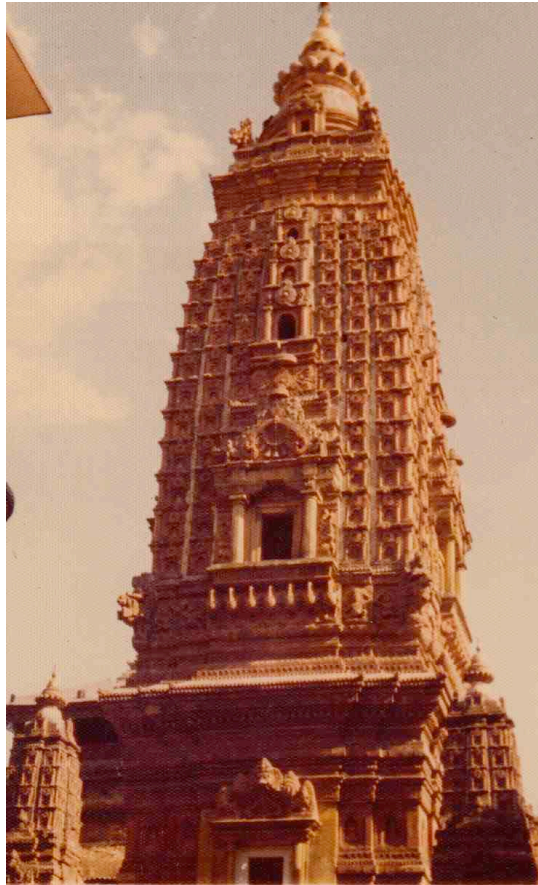
My aeroplane, Syangboche.



Myself, Syangboche.



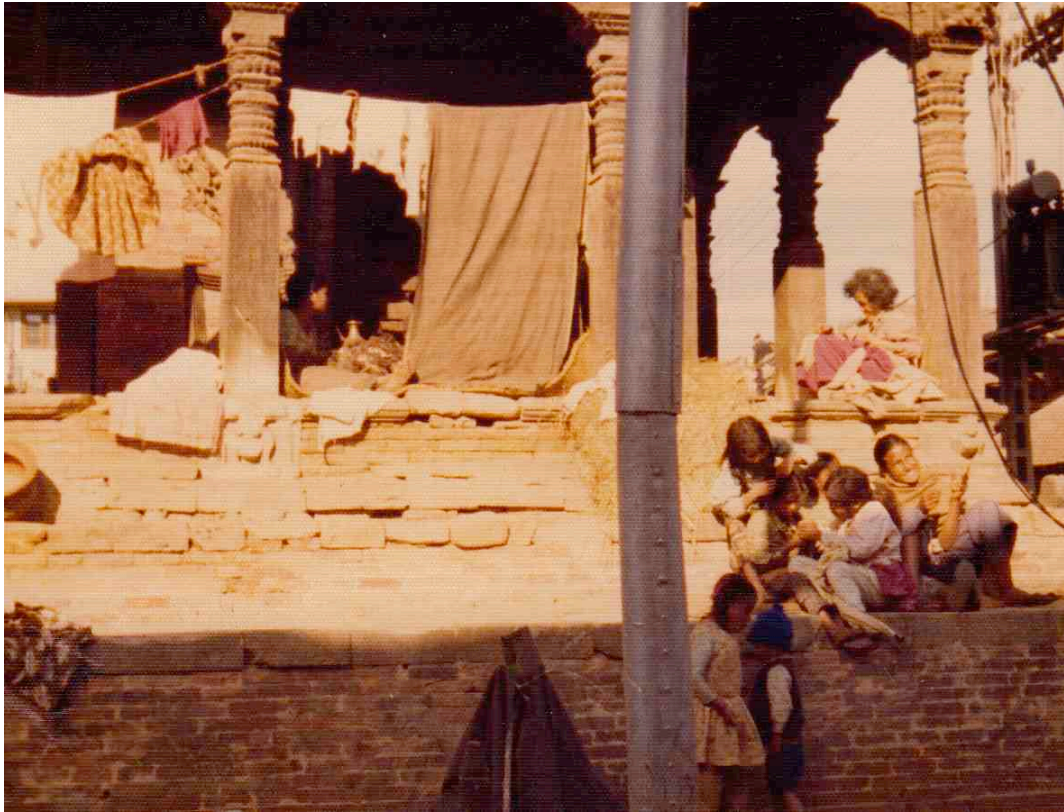
The Himalayas from my aeroplane. Mount Everest's peak can just be seen above the range on the left.



Maha Bauddhu Temple, Patan.



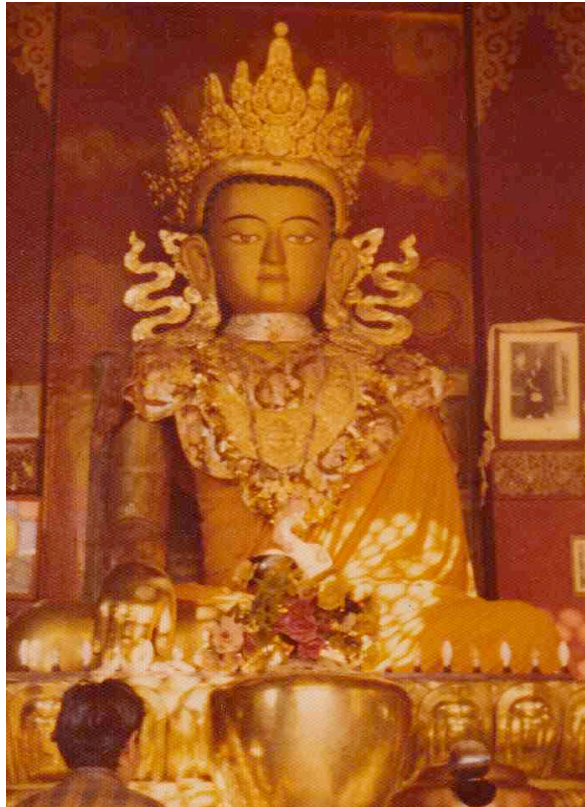
Carving on building, Patan.



Street scene, Patan.



Swayambunath Temple, Kathmandu.



Buddha statue, Swayambunath Temple, Kathmandu.

Hotel Soaltee, Kathmandu

11 February 1976

After getting up quite late this morning I was picked up by my guide and taken to Bhaktapur, a city about nine miles to the east of Kathmandu. It was founded in 900 AD and, like Patan, contains much medieval art and architecture. Like most places in Nepal, the poverty, dirt and stench were all obvious. On the other hand, the sculptures, woodcarvings and huge pagodas consecrated to different gods and goddesses were most impressive. I saw the largest pagoda in Nepal – five storeys high and built in the early eighteenth century. In the city centre people from the nearby hills were selling their produce. Some had newly born babies with them, which they were covering with thick mud-like oil that was supposedly for protection. Much of Bhaktapur consists of dark alleys, too narrow for cars, with old houses covered by intricate woodcarvings.

After lunch at the hotel I went to the National Museum. The exhibits were not well arranged but some were of interest. There were, for example, a sword presented to the

first Rana prime minister by Napoleon III and some leather cannon used in a war against the Tibetans at the end of the eighteenth century. There were also dozens of pictures of Nepal's rulers.

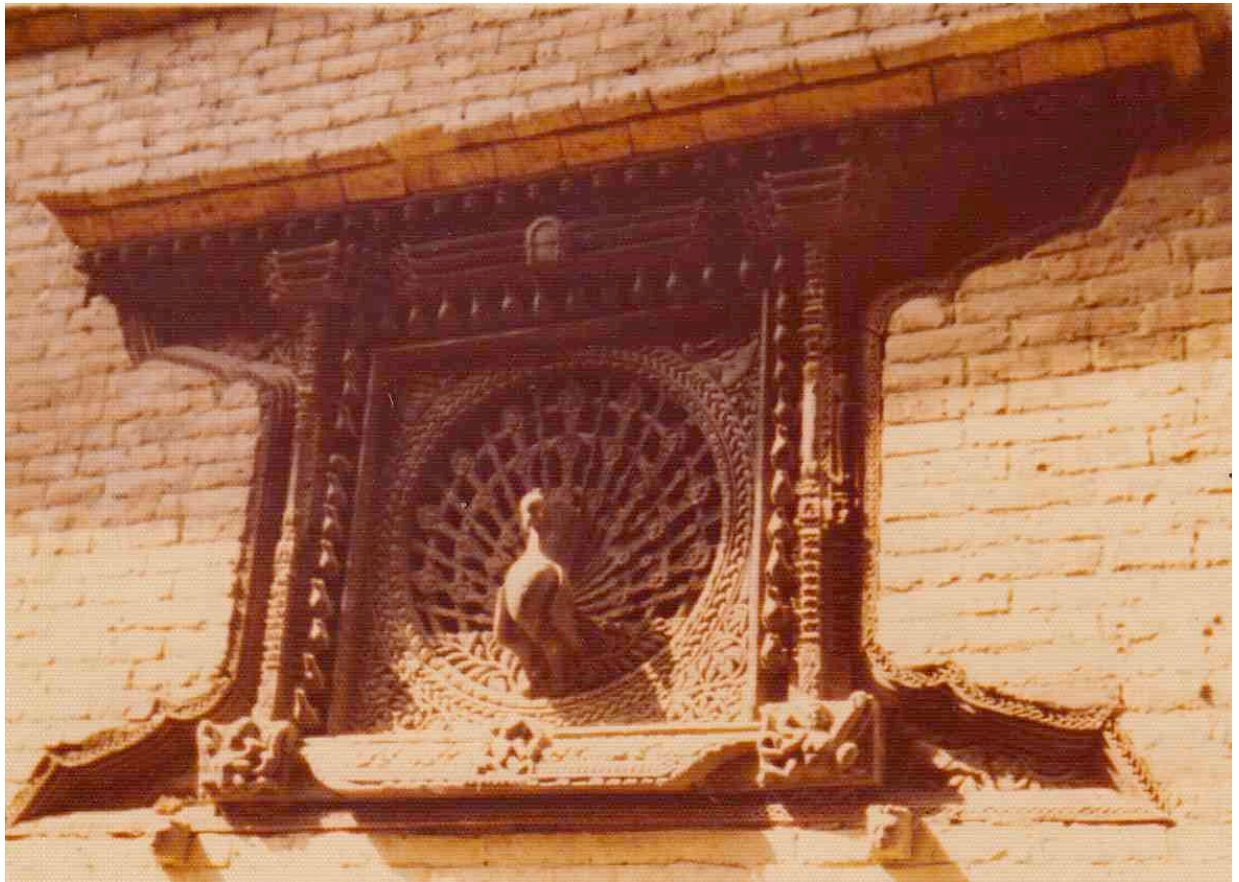
Tonight I had dinner at the hotel's Nepalese restaurant. I ate a very tasty mutton dish, something I will try to have again before I leave.



Bell tower with Krishna Mandir Temple in the background, Bhaktapur.



Parents and their newly born babies, Bhaktapur.



Carved Peacock window, Bhaktapur,

Hotel Soaltee, Kathmandu

12 January 1976

After breakfast this morning I set off with my driver and guide for the Chinese border, an all day trip. The road there is one of the few highways in Nepal. The Chinese built it 15 years ago and it connects Kathmandu with Lhasa in Tibet. We started by driving through the Kathmandu Valley and ascending a series of steep hills until we reached the village of Dhulikel, some 6000 feet high. From there we saw magnificent views of the distant Himalayas and the valleys before them. We then dove down again through hilly but intensely farmed country. Beside us on one side was a fast flowing river. Some of the villages through which we passed were most picturesque. Children waved as we went past. After a few hours the mountains of Tibet came into view. Before long we reached the border.

A bridge crossing a river marked the border. On one side were a few rather scruffy Nepalese soldiers wandering about. On the other was a smartly turned out Chinese guard standing rigidly to attention beside a sentry box. The only buildings I could see on the Chinese side appeared to be military barracks. Before the Tibetan revolt of 1959 there were many people who crossed the border from both sides. Today a few Nepalese are allowed to trade in Tibet but not Tibetans are allowed into Nepal. Very occasionally refugees manage to get through but, according to my guide, the Chinese guards are ruthlessly efficient.

We drove back the same way and had lunch at a small village. I got back to the hotel just after 4.00 PM.

I flew out of Kathmandu the following morning to spend most of the rest of my holiday in Thailand.



Looking towards the Himalayas from Dhulikel.



Near the road to the Chinese border.



The Chinese border. This was as close as I was allowed to take photos. The bridge is towards the photo's bottom left side. The white building is in China.