

September 27, 2013

Breakfast, day 1, not included in room price, \$4



Fried eggs, buff sausage, potato pakora-likes, crisp croissant with melted butter, beans, and corn flakes with hot milk. Comfortable although not cool in the morning, in the garden, but foretelling another scorcher. I'll try to be done with my perambulations by noonish - gotta be smart to survive in the colonies.

I've been offered a ride in the covered caboose behind a cycle (it's called a rickshaw): 400 rupee one hour, you want more, we discount. That's about four dollars an hour - sounds better than

the trudging I did yesterday. I asked the peddler (intentional entendre, spelling disregarded) if he could show me the best place to take a photo when we arrived at a site. He didn't understand. Then his friend came over, who had earlier offered me a taxi, and he didn't understand. This was yesterday, before I went on my walk. It was when I started to take pictures that I remembered why the previous times I had been to Kathmandu it had been so hard to take a decent pic of a lovely temple - they're all surrounded by apartment buildings on all sides and in their air space above.

October 2, 2013
Out of Katmandu

I'm sitting in the Free Wifi Zone of the Hill's Heaven Restaurant and Lodge in Bandipur. Up in the hills of central Nepal with a view of the Annapurnas and Makalu to die for but not high enough to prevent mosquitoes from consuming me. So much for failed hill stations.



My hotel is out in the boonies, about 250 yards from the hotel parking lot - thank the Babylonians for inventing wheeled luggage. When I asked the proprietor how to get to town he said "Oh go out there and turn there and you'll be right there, about 10 minutes". Then I suggested he have someone guide me and here I am, waiting for my Nepali thali with curried chicken and sipping

on my lemon soda. I took three peptos instead of two, just in case.

This morning I left Katmandu for Pokhara with a stop in Gorkha to visit the palace. The palace is not much to look at or to photograph although it does feature some lovely traditional wooden windows.



Its claim to fame is the view which was completely obscured by clouds today and the 1500 stone steps you have to climb to get to it: a hellish climb in the 90 degree temperature and 70% humidity and a precipitous descent. You do have time to admire, though, the outstanding handiwork of the builders of those steps. Ok, gotta go now. The meal was unappetizing but the soda hit the spot.

October 2, 2013
The way to Muktinath

It is said that you have to be accepted by Lord Vishnu in his form as Muktinath in order to arrive there. Maybe some of my blemishes render me unwelcome. We shall see.

Meanwhile, Pokhara is comfortable, my hotel room is clean and comfortable, and breakfast (included this time) is surprisingly good, including the cheese omelet.

It's raining out so maybe my plan to walk to the world peace stupa may have to be put off. Needless to say, there's no place in central Nepal where the mountains aren't obscured by the storms.



The forecast gets better later in the week, with tomorrow, when I'm supposed to fly, the worst. If my flight is cancelled I get wait listed for the next day, and so on until they catch up. Not sure how long I'll wait but if the gods are testing me they don't appear to be personal.

Thank you for reading and responding. It's a far cry from "the old days" when we would scribble notes to ourself which were subsequently unreadable and we remained incommunicado for weeks.

October 4, 2013
Pokhara to Jomsom

It's a hole-in-the-wall "cafe" near the Pokhara airport, where flights have not left for Jomsom for three days, including today. I'm sitting here with three young men, whom I met while waiting for the word to come down about today's flight: a guy from San Francisco, his friend who is Nepali (spent a lot of years in US) and his friend from Chennai who lives in Katmandu. Their flight had been cancelled twice, so they hired a jeep to go from Pokhara to Jomsom, variously given as 6 or 8 hours and unanimously identified as one of the worst roads in the world. I invited myself along (dividing \$250 by four sounds better than by three) and they graciously returned the invitation.



Recording the events of yesterday: They were a congenial group (not unimportant when the trip actually took over 11 hours!). As far as the road, my comparisons are those from Lhasa to the Nepal border and most any road in India's Uttarakhand state. The former is now paved over, I hear, the latter is less bumpy but more precipitous than yesterday's but my stiff neck and bruised right thigh tell me that nothing I've been on matches this road for bone busting bumps. This was not a road trip, it was a no-road trip.



We've all been on bumpy roads of course. And, after all this was only a road, not a metaphor for something else. So, now, here I am in Jomsom, in the heart of the Annapurna range, and just a hop down hill from Muktinath. My guide, Susil, met me as the jeep pulled up to the hotel, having waited for me all day. And, now, as I finish this, it's tomorrow, and we head for Muktinath.

October 5, 2013

My guide Susil waiting for his breakfast at the Trekker's Inn,
Jomsom



I wrote a long email missive while I waited for breakfast, didn't finish, and forgot to save. The few things I remember reporting were the condition of the room: seems clean, but no toilet paper, towels, soap, and bed sheets. What's a guy to do?

Fortunately I brought the bathroom stuff: Rabi, my travel agent warned me at the last moment in Katmandu. Also, after sampling two lightweight silk bed sheets on previous trips and rejecting

them for poor design, I'm now carrying a lightweight down sleeping bag.

So I was prepared for the deprivation. What I wasn't prepared for were the meals: dinner at the Trekker's Inn was the best chicken curry I have had in Nepal. And breakfast was even better, a nicely cooked omelet and scrumptious hashed browns.

Susil and I were waiting for the jeep to take us to Muktinath to fill so we could leave when who should come along but my three friends from the previous day. So we all rented a jeep and made the journey, arriving just in time for lunch in Ranipauwa.

Then up to the temple!

October 5, 2013
Muktinath temple

The temple is maybe 150 steps up from Ranipauwa. A long queue had formed inside the compound at the entrance of the temple to make offerings to the god. There's a lot else to see, though, and Susil took me on a circumambulation of the temple compound which involved a lot more steps and a good deal of climbing - in the rain. This photo of the temple from the hill above it is one product of that gambol.



There are natural gas vents here and flames have been kept burning by the caretakers for over a millennium. There's also a natural spring and just behind and at the same level as the temple

is a semicircle of 108 leaded mythical-creature-head spouts pouring water. Many people ran, almost naked, through all of them. I dipped my hand in one and rubbed my pate.



The combination of fire and water, air (at a fine altitude), and earth (the mountains), makes this one of the holiest sites on earth for Hindus as well as for Buddhists.

The queue was down to five when I returned from my jaunt. I took off my shoes and socks (Oh, were the puddles cold!), gave Susil my camera and pack to hold, and followed the line into the sanctuary. One young guard (access and security here are Nepali police) asked me where I was from, I told him "America". He beckoned me around the inside line over to the inner door,

explaining to me that non-Hindus could not enter but could look. He cleared a step for me, then the top step. I put one foot on the top step, held on to one post, and leaned forward as far as I could. The priest inside pointed to the image which I couldn't make out well and said "See, Vishnu". I pruned for 10 or 15 seconds and then backed out, walked around the temple, washed my feet in water from the spouts, left for Ranipauwa.

You could say not much happened today.

October 7, 2013
Gumba boy



I'm sitting on the front step of the Mustang (pronounced Moostahng) Eco-Museum. It's 1:30 Monday afternoon on a crystal clear day and, if I look up from the screen, there's the broad ice face of Nilgiri staring back, with a crown of scattered light clouds, a far cry from the socked in dark clouds that have replaced the mountains since I left Katmandu a week or so ago.

That, and the garden of marigolds, makes up for the reality of the sign that reads: "Monday-Holiday".

I'm in Jomsom, on a holiday of sorts: the weather transition has generated strong winds which, after the first two flights out to Pokhara, halted flying for the day (I was on flight #4). This is not Muktinath, but it does partake of the same quality that underlies the manifest: in other words, Lord Vishnu resides here as well as in Muktinath (yes, of course he resides everywhere, but allow me my poetic license).

We came down from Muktinath yesterday, Shusil and I (he gave me his email address this morning and I found that I'd been pronouncing his name wrong all along). We stopped at gumbas (in India, gompas) - monasteries - in Jharkot and Kagbeni, stopped for lunch after the gumba in Kagbeni, stopped many times so I could take a picture, and arrived in Jomsom over 9 hours after we started, exhausted, sweaty, and exhilarated. It was downhill all the way but a really long downhill.



Today I'm feeling surprisingly fine with only a little aching in my feet and lower legs. I was feeling pretty accomplished until I chatted with Frank, a retired teacher from Colorado, who, at 77, had just completed the notoriously difficult and wonderfully exotic 10 day Upper Mustang trek!

Now, maybe I'll take a few more pics of Nilgiri, or go inside and cap off this day with a few verses of the Gita. Nothing like piling it on. Maybe the winds will abate and the storm clouds remain in abeyance, and I'll get back to Pokhara tomorrow. I have nothing more scheduled for the remainder of my stay, so perhaps the gods will make my decisions for me (yes, I know, despite who we think is in charge, we may be missing the broader picture, and who we think we are may never be making our decisions - but that's another story for another day).

In case I haven't said it before, thanks for reading and thanks for responding: instant reflection in the time of instant communication.

October 10, 2013

Sitting in Pokhara airport.

Is this a refrain? The last time was to Jomsom and the flight was grounded due to weather. This time I'm heading to Katmandu and I think there would have to be a larger cosmic event to stop Yeti Air from getting there.

It's been three days since I arrived in town from my epic run downhill from Muktinath to Jomsom - and then an overnight at Jomsom while the winds abated. Flight #2 did take off, on Tuesday, a day late, with me on it. I have no idea about subsequent flights. I hung out with Zoe for some of the extra day in Jomsom - a young lady from the Netherlands who spoke excellent English and has a job waiting for her as waitress on Seaborne as soon as she finishes traveling. It was especially welcome to have someone to chat with while eating.

The weather has been warm and muggy and the broad expanse of the Annapurna range has appeared only as "pop-ups", most noticeably the peak of Macchupuchare against a gray background. I asked the gods for a bit of blue for contrast and they said, clearly and emphatically: "Use Photoshop and don't bug us!"

I taxied on Wednesday to Sarangkot, about a half hour away, to see the range but nothing resembling the panoramic photos that are on sale at Lakeside in Pokhara. On Thursday I taxied to the World Peace Stupa which, likewise, offers the panorama. There were Annapurna, Annapurna 3 or 4, and Macchupuchare as pop-ups against the gray but not a hint of clarity.



Off to Katmandu now. I have no hotel reserved so I'll have to pretend I'm 28 again and spend my day searching and researching. I'm thinking of staying a few days in Nagarkot, a hill station 30 km from Ktm, where it should be cooler than Ktm. The weather forecast calls for rain, so Everest and the other high ones in eastern Nepal will likely pull an "Annapurna" on me.

My last two visits to Nepal, in 1998 and 2004 were in the spring, when the mountains are typically concealed by the clouds. Fall is the season of clarity. We shall see, it's not over yet.

There are a few things I want to see in Katmandu: Durbar Square, Bhaktapur and Changu Narayan temple, just past Bhaktapur.

Maybe tomorrow. I already have a job for today.

Best to you.

Addendum: arrived at Katmandu airport about 1/2 hour after takeoff on a twin propellor plane seating about 27 (the Tara airplane that flies Pokhara to Jomsom is twin engine seating about 17).

The skies had a lot of blue from several miles up or however high the plane flies. You can see things, being above the mountains, that you can't see from the ground: mountains have mass and depth, they occur in clumps, separated by space - so a mountain may be multiple peaks or shaped like a shoulder, or a face, or a kidney bean. Mountains or mountain clumps seem to have a personality although hard to define it when you only have a few moments to look - and, being far away, you can only look.

Exited airport, caught a cab, got a hotel, finished missive, sent.

October 13, 2013
Back at the Nirvana Garden



Couldn't complete the Ktm to Delhi flight transaction online, Shiva barked a few words into the phone — it got done and with a better rate than online. Couldn't find a decent hotel at a reasonable price in Nagarkot, Rabi called his friend there and I'm in a hotel at a good price. Instead of my spending \$60 RT for a taxi there both Rabi and Shiva worked to line up the tourist bus and promised to walk me to it — \$6 RT.

Across from me at the table is a young Asian lady and a monk, both on devices, and drinking what may be milk tea. Under the

table is a beige dog beggar. I just finished an "American Apple pie" and I'm sipping my cappuccino. Outside people in robes or in ordinary tourist clothes, holding umbrellas or cameras or both, circumambulate the Boudhanath stupa, largest stupa in Nepal. The pigeons have largely vacated the dome - it may be too wet for them. The eyes are staring into the distance.



Back in the Nirvana Garden Hotel - for one night. Tomorrow I leave for Nagarkot, presumably by tourist bus. The weather in both places calls for rain, not related to Cyclone Phailin in the Bay of Bengal. Perhaps there will be a moment of clarity — at sunrise is the favored time - and I will be rewarded with the panorama that includes Sagarmatha in the north east and maybe even Macchupuchare and the Annapurnas in the far west. In any event, it should be a peaceful interlude and maybe an opportunity for

some extra meditation - or communion with the essence of the mountains.



I had a good dinner last night at a noisy restaurant. I'll try somewhere else tonight. Felt a sore throat coming on earlier today but feel better now. Stomach and bowels are well, in case anyone wonders.

Hope you're doing well. See you soon.

October 14, 2013
In the lobby



I'm in the lobby of Hotel Chautari - Paradise Inn, Nagarkot. The bus from Katmandu took a little over 1 1/2 hours to get here, all in the pouring rain, the last half hour of which was uphill around a long series of hair-pin turns. The driver and his arms are burly.

The next two days will be a welcome meditation retreat. A walk from my room to the dining room is a bath, so longer walks are out. The fog has cut visibility to 60 feet (daytime, that is), so mountain viewing is out (with the possible exception of a minor

miracle). Wifi in the lobby is good but there are smokers lurking and the lobby is quite a wet distance from my room, up and down and around a barrel of steps. Needless to say there is no Wifi in the rooms - this is a spread out place.

I'm glad no one took me up on the offer to Skype a live view of the mountains from my room. The room is a nice big one. They say there's heat in the room but I haven't figured out how to generate it — I do, however, have all the lights on.

The lobby has filled up. Everyone is on a device: phoning, Skyping, playing games, commenting on those who are doing the above. They all look like upscale Nepalese but this could be a hotel in the Catskills.



One of the first books I downloaded when I got my iPad (unlike the iPod, you can actually and easily read on the iPad) was the Bhagavad Gita, translated by Edwin Arnold in the 19th C. One thing I like about it is that it's a poetic version, without verse breaks or commentary. You can hear echoes of truth that you may have missed while seeking "meaning" in the commentary. Early in Chapter 2 Krishna begins to speak and in 100 or so lines lays out the essentials:

Never the spirit was born; the spirit shall
cease to be never;
Never was time it was not; End and
Beginning are dreams!
Birthless and deathless and changeless remaineth the spirit for
ever;
Death hath not touched it at all, dead though the house of it
seems!

This brought to mind something that T. S. Eliot says in the third of his Four Quartets:

I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant -
Among other things - or one way of putting the same thing:
That the future is a faded song, a Royal Rose or a lavender spray
Of wistful regret for those who are not yet here to regret,
Pressed between yellow leaves of a book that has never been
opened.
And the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way
back.



There's a large group of French-speakers at one table but other than that all I hear is what I'll assume to be Nepali. The table next to me, with eight settings (mine has the requisite two) was about to be possessed by a family with an unhappy five year old about 15 minutes ago. I wonder if it was my audible moan and gnashing of teeth that drove them away.

Back to Krishna over tea. The key phrase in Eliot, which says to me that they're speaking the same language, is this one: yellow leaves of a book that has never been opened. Wow! What a wonderful image to represent relative existence and those words from the Gita: End and Beginning are dreams!

The unspoken in Eliot, which dominates the truth of the Gita, is likewise unspoken in the rest of Four Quartets, but illuminated repeatedly while remaining unspoken. After all, the "spirit", as Arnold names Being, (Maharishi, in his translation personalizes "spirit" as "He"; so would one speak who is) is ineffable.

All the Nepalis are gone, except the wait staff. All the French are still here, enjoying their company.

Catch you later.

October 19, 2013
The Journey



I set the alarm for 5:46 hoping to catch the early display. In the morning, the sun cracked through, the cloud bank was breached, and there was blue sky, just blue sky, no mountains, it was all a big shuck.

Oh, wait, that's not blue sky, that's a blue cloud bank behind the black one. Intolerable! Sixteen days searching for the Himalayan panorama and what do I get? One bank replaced by another! The truth is that no weight of hyperbole can obscure the failure of my mission to discover the elusive Himalayan mountain range.

And, then - would you believe it? - the blue bank broke. You wouldn't believe it - and you shouldn't. I had crawled back into my sleeping bag, fallen asleep, and had an explorer's dream. Drat!



In the way of dreams, I'm now sitting in the Garden of Dreams, right near my Katmandu hotel. The Garden is the creation of an early 20th century local ruler, recently renovated by an Austrian organization. It's a small well kept-up garden, not on the scale of the royal gardens in Srinagar, but it's a pleasant place to spend my last few hours in Nepal, before I head to the airport for the next saga in this adventure.



I left Nagarkot with many good photos — although none of the mountains — and a head cold. The last three days in Katmandu I stayed in a clean and comfortable hotel appropriately named Hotel Holy Himalaya. I visited Boudhanath, for the second time, the biggest and holiest stupa in the Katmandu valley and Swayambunath, high on a hill overlooking Katmandu. Despite the head cold, which lasted only a day, and perhaps also because the weather is milder, my step is a little brisker. Maybe also, because of all the exercise, I'm in better shape (and about 10 pounds lighter).



Encircling the stupa at Boudhanath, leaving an avenue of maybe 20 yards, are souvenir shops and restaurants and cafés and other temples. I stopped in a bead shop and negotiated for a sandalwood necklace and bracelet, aware that the fragrance is most likely sprayed or rubbed on (the distinction between the "fake" sandalwood and the "real"). The bracelet is well made and has its fragrance three days later - I'd say acceptable for \$2 whatever wood was used.

I got several responses to my comparison of the Gita and Eliot's Four Quartets. One response brought to mind two lines from Eliot and how, over the years of reading him, my approach to what he has to say has matured. The lines are:

If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.

It scours our understanding if we really hear it. Which is what it should do if it's legitimate. If I assume that Eliot has something to say and that I want to know what it is I have no choice but to allow myself to listen.

Eliot's Four Quartets is a modern Western secular scripture. It wasn't accidental that I compared it to the Bhagavad Gita. They speak the same language - although the language that Eliot speaks is more accessible to our ears.

I want to thank all of you who have partaken in this journey to the majestic mountains, eternally here, visible or not; to Nepal, wherever it may be.