

Destination:

Nepal

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Suzan Crane transports us to
far off, exotic destinations



I fell in love many times over in Nepal – with the unbridled beauty of the country’s raging rivers, the majesty of its towering mountains, the shimmer of its glistening lakes and the richness of its verdant valleys; with the locals, so warm and generous of spirit; with the many friends I made during my time there. Despite the political turmoil, the constant checkpoints and the threat of Maoist insurgency, Nepal’s magic cast its mesmerising spell on me, and I did not want to leave.

In shocking contrast to Tibet’s austere topography, Nepal loomed before me like the emerald gardens of heaven, rich and alive with colour, waterfalls dancing down hillsides, azure rivers cutting a swathe across the Himalayan ringed South Asian country. The outstretched

arms of an impossibly verdant countryside beckoned us into its fold immediately upon arrival.

More than three years have passed since my expedition through Nepal (and the penning of that journal entry) but the recall remains vivid; from the giddy teenage boys with whom we shared the roof of a local bus which transported us from the Tibetan border into the heart of Kathmandu, the country's capital, to Shiva, a young, fatherless "untouchable" who befriended me in a remote Himalayan village one day. His illusory dream of becoming a doctor both saddened and touched me; his thirst for knowledge and a particularly charming assertiveness prompted me into action.

"Stay here and teach," he implored. "My mother will feed you and you can live in my room." His bedroom, an austere shoebox tucked into a corner of the thatched roof dwelling in which he resided with at least ten others was all he could call his own. And he was generously willing to bequeath it to me. While I returned to my guesthouse in Pokhara that day, I did revisit the secluded mountain village several times more, enduring three rides on rickety local buses that ribboned their way over rock-strewn dirt roads ascending to the summit of paradise. As my time was limited, teaching was not an option, so I conceptualised what I thought would be a longer term solution to an immediate problem. Hence, the Namaste Cross Cultural Pen Pal Programme was born in an effort to expose the kids to other cultures while helping them improve their English skills. Working with the marvellous students and the dedicated, albeit understaffed and underfunded faculty, at Sree Kalika Secondary School remains a most poignant memory in a life full of such memories. I still often think of Shiva in the hopes that he is thriving, although realistically, he is probably still sitting outside his humble home on a school day, taking care of his younger siblings, nieces and nephews while the adults are at the market hawking their wares.

Nepal is a magical and emotional place – so full of scenic beauty and spiritual devotion, yet plagued by insurmountable poverty, an antiquated caste system and political turbulence. Despite the restoration of parliamentary life and the signing of a peace agreement between the new government and Maoist (Communist Party of Nepal) insurgents in November 2006, travel advisories continue to inhibit the prolific tourism once enjoyed by this nation.

Though the Maoist leadership has publicly prohibited its cadres from engaging in any human rights abuse, media reports indicate that incidents of extortion, abduction, assault and murder persist. And while widespread protests have abated, the potential for demonstrations and disruptions remains high, with strikes still periodically paralysing the country. But recent travellers insist that by exercising reasonable caution and common sense – as one would in any developing or politically volatile nation – a Nepali travel experience remains unrivalled.

Boasting eight of the world's highest peaks, including the fabled Mt Everest, Nepal's vast scenic, historical and cultural offerings galvanise the imagination and fuel the soul. Known as the "abode of the gods", the country is rife with Buddhist shrines and Hindu temples and has long attracted pilgrims and other spiritual

inexplicably began losing riders. Many hours were spent on search and rescue missions as we attempted to locate the remnants of our splintered group. We never actually made it to the polo grounds that day and barely arrived in time for the match the following morning. Surely there are easier ways to reach this expansive national park, but I seemingly am not one prone to simplicity. But as with all travel, the journey is the destination, and our journey was indeed eventful. And it didn't require walking, something I avoid even in a locale renowned for its magnificent trekking opportunities...

From mild day hikes to arduous extended expeditions, most visitors to Nepal take to the trail. Perhaps the most trodden is the Annapurna circuit, a three-week journey over and around the majestic Himalayan range underscored by sublime vistas and



seekers. More than 35 per cent of the small nation's landmass has been designated as natural sanctuaries, with nine national parks and three wildlife reserves providing ample opportunity to commune with nature.

My excursion to Royal Chitwan National Park epitomised my typically atypical experiences in Nepal as I joined a gaggle of international travellers riding 15 rented motorcycles to witness the spectacle of the annual elephant polo match. An early morning departure from the quaint lakeside tourist enclave of Pokhara should have rightfully deposited us in Chitwan by early afternoon. But somewhere along the bumpy, bum-numbing roads, we

the many indigenous villages peppering the hillsides. At least that's what I hear, as I am perhaps one of the three or four people in history who have voluntarily eschewed this undertaking. You see, I'm a bit lazy when it comes to physical overexertion. "Does trekking involve walking?" I queried the locals. Yes. Hmmm. Well, then, I think I'll fly instead. And so I did – paragliding on the wings of fate over the glistening waters of Lake Pokhara, embraced by the jagged arms of the surrounding snow-capped crests. Confronting my fear of heights, I was awarded with a matchless panorama and a liberating, albeit slightly nauseating, thrill ride.



From the sky to the sea, I chanced the grade 4 rapids of the Bote Kosi River, one of the numerous world-class rafting channels (including Arun River, Bheri River, Seti Khola River, Sun Kosi River) snaking their way through the country's lush interior. During that exploit, I proudly hold the distinction of being the first woman overboard at a leisurely point in the journey when we were nowhere near a rapid! Okay, so I'm unathletic as well as a bit slothful, so luckily



one of Nepal's many festivals will likely be on the docket. In October, the pre-eminent Nepali celebration of Dasain takes place, while during November's Tihar, crows, dogs and cows are venerated and food is shared amongst friends and family. Other key Hindu festivals include Holi (the Colour Festival) in March, the vibrant Indra Jatra (September), Chaitra Dasain (April), and the Red Machchhendranath Rath Jatra (May-June), which features extravagant chariot parades in honour of Lord Krishna. Shiva devotees celebrate Haribodhini Ekadashi in November and Maha Shivaratri in March.

Amongst the notable, but less flamboyant, Buddhist fetes are Losar (Tibetan New Year) which is celebrated with masked *chaam* dances at Swayambhunath, Bodhnath and Tibetan monasteries across the country, Mani Rimdu in November and Vesak (Buddha's birthday) in May.

So, whether you are a motivated adrenalin junky, a student of religion or history, an aspiring charity worker (there are many volunteer

opportunities there) or simply someone who prefers to serenely saunter through this nation's rich heritage, Nepal provides the perfect forum for doing so. And next time I may just consider swapping my dancing shoes for trekking boots!



for me, Nepal also offers more leisurely pursuits. Shopping, for instance, is top notch in Kathmandu, where one can purchase flamboyantly hued silk-woollen sweaters and scarves, intricately hand-painted religious *thankas* or meticulously crafted silver jewellery. A requisite visit to Bodhnath, the largest Buddhist stupa in Nepal and a revered pilgrimage site can be followed by a stroll through the capital's historical Durbar Square, which delights with ancient examples of traditional architecture and numerous landmarks including Hanuman Dhoka, the old Royal Palace. And for those

who prefer to put their money where their mouth is, an all night casino will happily take your cash after you've wine, dined and danced the early evening away in Thamel, Kathmandu's lively tourist ghetto.

And depending on the time of year,