

Kathmandu to Silchar

2nd November – 19th November 2015

A small party gathers outside the Elbrus Home Hotel to wave us off. The owner, Khem is joined by a couple of the other staff who have looked after us so well during our stay. Fellow British cyclists, Graham, Frances and Sarah are also keen to see the tandem in operation. A swerve to the left to avoid one of the many potholes then a swerve to the right as a curious scooter comes a bit too close then we're on the move at long last.



Back on the road at last

Petrol supplies have been trickling into the country with a large delivery from China helping to get a few more vehicles back on the road so the streets are getting busier again, but it's still a long way from the gridlock that we were told was more usual.

Before leaving Kathmandu we wanted to pay a visit to a charity on the outskirts of town. I'd met Taranath a few nights before at a talk by Next Generation Nepal about the disturbing child trafficking problems still taking place in Nepal and he'd invited me to see his own work at a refuge on the outskirts of

town.



Taranath

SADLE provides accommodation, medical treatment and teaches skills to people who've been cured of, but left disfigured by leprosy. The intricate handicraft items that they are taught how to make are exported and sold, predominantly in Germany but also several other countries in Europe including the UK. The residents seem happy to be in an understanding community and show fantastic dexterity while stitching, printing and weaving. The disease is a big problem in Nepal and this is one of many institutions making an impact working to help look after those who've been affected.



New SADLE Charity Refuge, Kathmandu

Tara is grateful for our interest and we hope that we can promote the cause in some way when we get home. In the meantime you can find out more here.

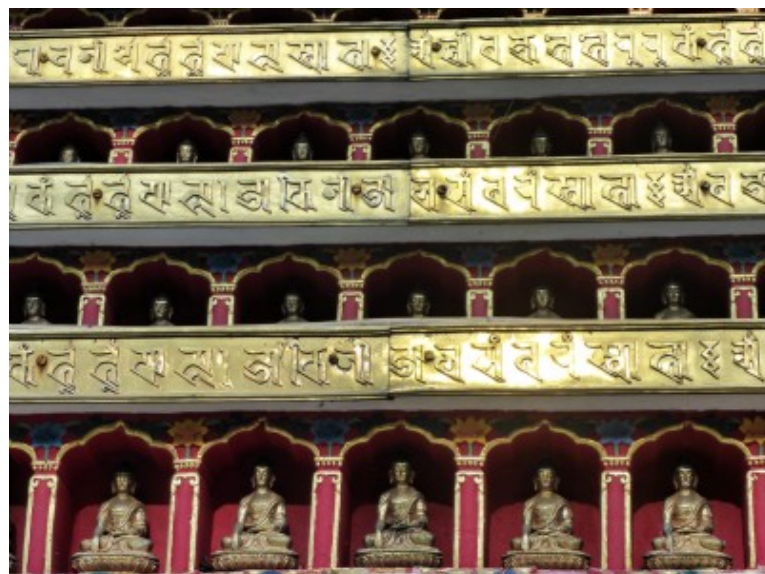
The campus for SADLE sits on a hill alongside several Buddhist monasteries including Kopan so we walk up to take a closer look. We're shown inside by a young Vietnamese monk who has already studied under the Dalai Lama ("He's *such* a nice guy") in Dharamsala and will now stay here for 6 more years. He's amazed that we'll be cycling all the way from Kathmandu to his home town of Hanoi.



Our Vietnamese guide (we didn't catch his name unfortunately)



We made sure stuck to the rules



Kopan Monastery

The back streets of Kathmandu are the worst we've seen in any major city ranging from dry and dusty to wet and muddy, rarely with any kind of permanent surface and always with huge holes and rocks. It makes for slow progress all the way to Bhaktapur just 25km away where we stop for the day.



Bhaktapur

Bhaktapur has retained a lot more of its authenticity than its bigger neighbour. There are fewer modern buildings and the core of the town is a largely traffic free maze of cobbled streets and alleyways. Unfortunately the age of the buildings and the apparent lack of maintenance mean that it suffered badly during the earthquakes. The main Durbar Square is now missing some of its ancient temples and other buildings are lying half collapsed or propped up with bamboo scaffolding. Amazingly, Nyatapolo, the tallest temple in the country survived undamaged and retains its tiered, vegetated set of roofs.



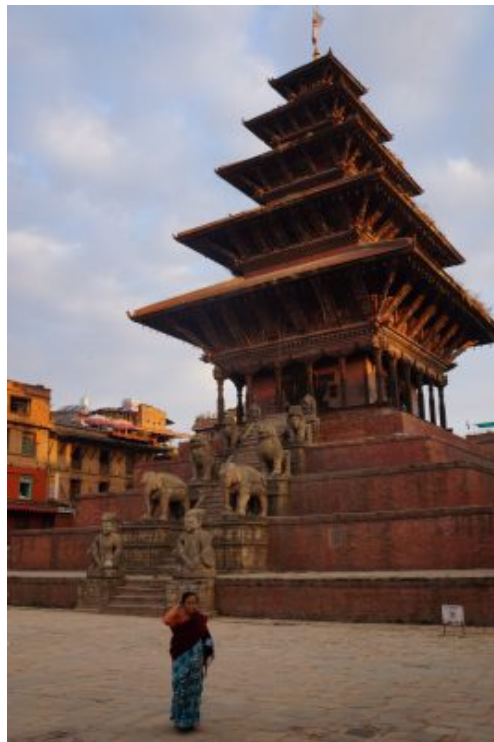
Steps to nowhere: the Siddhi Laxmi Temple was destroyed



First the earthquakes then the fuel crisis. 2015 has been a terrible year for Nepal.



Doorway in the Durbar Square



Nyatapolo Pagoda, built in 1701

Hindus love ringing bells and make it their priority for first thing in the morning so we're woken at 5am by the chimes from

devotees in the temple adjacent to our window. Out of Bhaktapur we find ourselves on a road amongst rice paddy fields and it's harvest time. The process is heavily labour intensive so whole villages get involved, first cutting the rice stalks with sickles and laying them in neat lines to dry. Then a group gathers in a circle to thrash off the rice grains by hitting clumps of stalks against an increasing pile on the ground. Finally the chaff is blown off by sifting the grains past an electric fan if they're lucky otherwise a man wafting a large tray creates the breeze. Our perceived value of the endless servings of rice and dahl just went up a notch or two.



Threshing the rice



Sifting off the chaff

Around lunchtime we stop to investigate a dhaba where a small girl in a tiny wedding dress is celebrating her birthday. Two cyclists pull in next to us and surprise us by saying 'Hello Kirsty!'. Kirsty had offered advice to Bjorn and Jens (<http://www.velofilia.de/en/>) in a Facebook group while we were in Kathmandu but we'd not made plans to meet up. By chance they'd caught us up and the tandem gave away our identity.



"Is that her husband?"

"No, it's her brother"



Bjorn and Jens –
<http://www.velofilia.de/en/>

We ride together for the afternoon with a stop for rice and

dahl at the next village then pull up at another dhaba just before a series of hairpins ramps up in front of us. We're forced to stop even though it's only 4:30 as it'll be dark by 5 so that's a challenge that can wait until the morning.



Straw stacks

A large tree in front of the dhaba has a stone platform built around it and the owners are happy for us to set up camp on there before providing us with dinner. We tuck into generous servings of rice and dahl.



Al fresco bedroom

We get another early wake up call at 2am, this time a singer who blows a horn between verses and seems to be wondering

around the village serenading each house. We snatch a bit more sleep before the sun comes up and then, while packing up we watch the day's meat supply being prepared. A young buffalo is brutally attacked by a man with a huge knife then the dead animal is covered with straw and set on fire, presumably to remove the hair. It's a sobering sight to start the day.



Today's special: Roast buff

With refreshed legs the first climb doesn't seem too bad. The road surface is lovely and smooth and the gradient is the right side of comfortable. We're now on the BP Koirala Highway, otherwise known as the Japanese Road due to it's generous benefactors. Japan funded most of the 20 billion rupees that it cost to build this important link from Kathmandu to the east of the country and also most of the machinery and manpower. It took 20 years to construct and the final stretch was opened in March this year so the tarmac is still fresh.



Smooth roads and soothing views on
The BP Highway

The bulk of the climbing comes after we've been up and down another small hill. We have to winch up 21 hairpins gaining 900m in the process to get over the ridge that marks the edge of the mountainous northern regions of Nepal and the start of the flatter plains to the south.



Hairpins a-plenty on the BP Highway

The Germans are waiting for us at the top alongside several fruit sellers and sweet stalls. Some fresh oranges and a few sugary jalebis are just what we need. The Japanese have done a fantastic job with this road and the way down is a smooth

squiggle of bends and curves off the hilltop. We race a tractor along the way and get a good lead until the road goes up again. The driver and his many passengers cheer us as they chug past.



What goes up, must come down

We finish the day in Bardibas and begin to consider accommodation options. Bjorn and Jens tell us they are adept 'Temple Tourers' having stayed in numerous religious buildings all across India and Nepal. We set them to task finding somewhere for us all to stay and a few km down the road they come up trumps after we're directed to a nearby church. Alongside it are a group of buildings that happen to house another refuge for victims of leprosy and the caretaker lets us into the small church hall where he's happy for us to stay the night. We're later joined by a local doctor who tells us that the church, refuge and nearby hospital have all been provided by charities in the UK and Ireland. Reinforcing what Tara had told us about the extent of the leprosy problems in Nepal, he tells us that 2 in 10,000 people are affected in this region.



The church hall, outside Bardibas

During dinner we watch a chicken suffering a similar fate to the buffalo at the hands of a man with a large knife. We all decide to go for the veg option to accompany our rice and dahl.

Now back on the flat plains we all move quickly in a tight formation of three bikes, sharing the work at the front. It's a very tricky way to ride on a tandem as there are constant and slight changes in power needed to stay within a few cm of the wheel in front. Kirsty has to be super sensitive of the pressure she can feel me putting through the pedals and ease off if necessary or add more when I call for 'Power, power!'. We also have the stopping distance of an oil tanker compared to the nimble solo bikes so when we're sat in second or third place on the line I have to look over the shoulders of the others to anticipate any potential emergency stop situations. In the end it's actually Bjorn and Jens who need to pay more attention and there are a couple of touches of wheel to pannier after a lapse of concentration, but no harm done.



Anglo-German Peloton



Big queues for the scarce petrol supplies

The land we're passing through is a huge flood plain for the Koshi River that we cross later in the day. Some French cyclists we'd met earlier had told us to look for freshwater dolphins and we manage to see several playing in the wake off the bridge struts.



Bumping into Michael and Nadhia who had ridden up from Sri Lanka



A lady carrying a heavy load over the Koshi River bridge

The end of the afternoon brings us into a village entirely occupied by Muslims in their characteristic skull caps and long kameez shirts. This is the first Muslim community we'd seen in Nepal and it means it may be hard to find a church

here but maybe they'll let us stay in the mosque? As usual, a knot of people soon forms around us who we greet with a cheerful '*Assalamu alaikum*' confusing them into thinking we're muslim too. When we explain that we're looking for somewhere to stay, eventually Sahib comes forward and offers his brother's house. They allow Bjorn and Jens to set up their mats on the porch while Kirsty and I get an outbuilding with a bed. We shower under a cold hand pump with lots of curious faces watching and then with typical Muslim generosity we're given a hearty meal of rice and dahl. Meanwhile Sahib's nephew, Nahan runs a mobile phone repair shop and offers his services to fix our broken camera battery charger.



Our hosts in Laukahi

All the houses in the village are made from straw but look quite new which we later learn is because in 2008 the whole area was swamped when the river burst its banks. Sahib is angry that they received very little support from the government, but the community was strong enough to rebuild everything themselves.



The guest suite in Laukahi

In the morning we're a bit weary having racked up 150km the day before but it's the last stretch before the border. The dynamics of the tandem are different to a solo bike so even a slight gradient requires an exponential increase in power meaning we have to stand hard on the pedals to stay with Bjorn and Jens whenever we cross one of the many small river bridges. However with a slight downhill gradient the roles are reversed so we take to the front and make them work hard to stay with us.



Tandem -power!

After refuelling on chow mein for a change we battle through

the last 10km of hectic traffic to the border at Mechinagar. Vehicles are loaded up with containers ready to collect fuel from the Indian side. Some optimistic motorbike passengers have two 20 litre jerry cans in each hand, no doubt forgetting how heavy they will be once they've been filled up.



Approaching the border at Mechinagar

We get stamped out of Nepal then cross a bridge over the river that forms a physical border. On the other side a familiar cocktail of smells and sounds immediately waft over us, the road surface degrades, we're swamped by people and join the back of a chaotic queue of traffic that appears to be going nowhere. Unmistakably India.



Into West Bengal

The road out of Panitanki is lined with trucks and fuel tankers, all waiting to deliver goods into Nepal as soon as the Indian government lets them. Some of the drivers have built beds under their trailers and groups gather round fires to cook their dinner. Many of them will have been here since the crisis started over two months ago and they have no idea how much longer they'll have to wait. Some of these containers may contain the vital materials that the NGOs and charities in Kathmandu desperately need to build shelters for the earthquake victims. A maddening situation for all concerned that we can only hope gets resolved soon.



The queue of stationary trucks stretching for 5km out of Panitanki

The keen eyes of Bjorn and Jens spot a small Hindu temple and after speaking to a few of the locals we're told it's Ok for us to stay in there. The temple 'Grandmother', responsible for keeping the temple in good order, looks after us by showing us the hand pump for washing and prepares a tasty meal of dahl and rice for us. In return we offer a donation and try to convey our gratitude despite the language barrier.

Jens and Bjorn had warned us that there are no lie-ins in a Hindu temple. At 5am a small group gathers and begin playing drums and cymbals and singing. As well as bells, Hindus love music in the morning. We're soon up and out.



Nothing like a drum being played
right next to your head to wake you
up in the morning

The line of trucks stretches nose to tail for 5km along the road in the direction of Siliguri. It's a big busy town where we stop for breakfast and catch up on emails at a rare wifi hotspot before pushing on out the other side.

This was a decision point for us as our original plan had been to enter Bangladesh at the border just south of Siliguri. The embassy in Kathmandu had said we couldn't get a visa at this border point but we'd considered trying anyway just in case as I'd read that Nepalese nationals could get through. However further research into the terrorist incidents that had taken place a few weeks earlier showed us that a Japanese man had been killed in a village in the region just past the border where we had planned to cross. The unlikely chance of getting across and the dangers on the other side seal the deal so reluctantly we decide to leave a visit to Bangladesh for another day.



Tucking into momos in Birpara

Instead a different country becomes a possibility. After a night in another temple in Birpara we ride out past the huge tea plantations that the province of Assam is renowned for. Up

ahead we can see green hills rising up out of the plains. This is the edge of the small mountain kingdom of Bhutan.



One of the many Assamese Tea Gardens

It's relatively straightforward to visit Bhutan, there are plenty of official tour agencies that will organise the visas, permits, itinerary and accommodation for you, all sanctioned by the Bhutanese government. The snag is that this is the only way you are allowed to visit unless you are from one of the few countries who are allowed to travel independently. The minimum cost is \$250 per person per day which is out of reach for most cycle tourists. However we had heard of one plucky Spaniard who calls himself the Bici clown who had managed to persuade the Bhutanese Embassy in Dhaka to give him a visa without needing to join an organised tour. His mission is to spread happiness throughout the world by giving free clown shows wherever he goes which fits nicely with the King of Bhutan's obsession with the well-being of his people. Their economy isn't measured in monetary terms but instead they use a measure of GNP – Gross National Happiness. Bici clown wants to make people happy so he was let in.



The road to Bhutan

We had hoped to present a similar case to the embassy in Dhaka, without the clown shows but with an emphasis on the joy people feel when seeing such an unusual bike as ours. We had even asked a family friend of high standing in the UK government to write a letter supporting our cause. However as we were no longer going to Dhaka this scuppered our plan. Embassies never reply to emails and it's hard to get through to the right person on the phone but we tried both anyway with no success.

In spite of this we approach the small, rural border at Gomttu at speed. There's no barrier, just a wide, unguarded gateway and we zoom through and turn sharp left. We're greeted by a picture of the King, the 4th Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck, on a billboard with the bright yellow and orange flag of Bhutan behind him, an ornate dragon striding across it. Someone shouts hello from the large building behind us and the shouts get increasingly urgent. Suddenly there's a policeman on a bicycle chasing us so we pull over, smile and greet him with as innocent a look as we can muster. Back at the large building we're asked to show our passports and visas. "We need a visa? Oh, we didn't realise, sorry". It's all taken good naturedly, the immigration officer even calls his boss to see if a concession can be made after I explain

how far we've come just to visit their country. But it's just not possible unless we stump up the huge daily fee, so after a bit more of a chat and buying some Bhutanese currency as a souvenir we're sent back into India.



Staying off the brakes as we head through the border gate



Just enough time for a photo with the King

Meanwhile Bjorn and Jens had gone on ahead to a different border crossing. Our American friend Chris who we'd met in Dushanbe had told us that he'd managed to get in at Jaigaon which is a much busier crossing used by hundreds of Indian

vehicles each day. Indians don't need visas to get into the border regions of Bhutan.

When we arrive in Jaigaon, we find Jens waiting for us. He and Bjorn have already been through without being challenged. The only issue was that Bjorn was told to wear his helmet by a policeman while they rode around Phuentsholing, the Bhutanese town immediately on the other side of the border.

Sure enough when we all ride back down through the Bhutan Gate no one seems to notice. We're in!



The streets of
Phuentsholing



Phuentsholing Students

We drop the bikes at a hotel who ask few questions and are happy to take our Indian Rupees, though 1 Rupee = 1 Bhutanese Ngultrum so the two currencies are interchangeable.



Prayer wheels,
Phuentsholing

Despite effectively being one town with a fence down the middle, the difference between Jaigaon and Phuentsholing is remarkable. There's peace and calm, no rattling auto riskshaws and beeping traffic. It's also much cleaner and tidier with the roads and buildings all in good order and there's a nice green park in the town centre where people are gathering to help prepare for the upcoming celebrations. It's the King's birthday in three days time so flags are being hung above every doorway and there are huge posters of his majesty with inspirational quotes and supportive messages written underneath them. A stage is being built in the park for the cultural events and speeches. It looks like it's all set to be a great party.



Preparing for the royal birthday party



While taking a stroll we meet a group of scouts on their way back from their weekly meeting. "Where's your tour guide?" asks Jimmy but we manage to skirt round the issue that we're there illegally and he and his friends offer to show us to the nearby monastery. Bhutan is a Buddhist country so the young monks are all dressed in the familiar deep red robes with shaven heads that we'd seen in Ladakh and Himachal. We join in a football match and find that not only are the monks quicker and more skilful than us but they can also hide the ball by dropping their robes over it. We defend bravely but the final whistle ends the match with a score of 1-0 to the monks.



Whose robe is whose?



Posing with the scout group in front of the temple



Pass it!



Kick it!

Jimmy and the scouts show us to their friend's shop where we're given some local food. Then we have a more substantial meal back in the town centre including the Bhutanese speciality of Datsi, an interesting combination of cheese and chilies.



Trying on a Bhutanese
Gho

Then our Bhutan adventure comes to an end. In the hotel we're met by the staff who ask to see our visas. Of course we don't have any so apologetically they tell us we have to leave. With the upcoming birthday celebrations security is being tightened with random police checks on hotels. They would be in trouble if they were found to have let several foreigners stay without visas so for everyone's sake we reluctantly pack up and ride 500m back through the gateway to a hotel in Jaigaon.

Our snapshot of this little known country was fun while it lasted and I hope one day we can come back for a more legitimate and thorough visit.



School children in traditional dress
in the central park

After Jaigaon our route takes us back onto the plains of Assam, past the Bhata Tiger Reserve where a wild elephant roams alongside the road. Then onto a partially built dual carriageway that helps us speed into Borobisha.



Spot the elephant

In India it's hard to get through a single week without finding yourself in the middle of some kind of festival. The beginning of November is Dewali – the Festival of Light but more accurately it's as much a festival of sound as well as light. The music being pumped out of a townwide speaker system is deafening and there are strings of firecrackers being let off like gunfire. We can hardly hear the policeman who is

trying to direct us to the nearby church but we try to interpret his hand signals as best we can. All along the main streets are huge bamboo gantries with lighting boards that come alive with moving images after dark while dozens of firework displays explode overhead.



Dewali lighting displays

We find the church and it's locked but we're then led around the corner to a school who a passerby thinks may be able to help. The teacher who opens the gate of the 7th Day Adventist English School is more than happy to welcome us in and we're quickly installed in the guest bedrooms of the principal's apartment. Raju Jacob and Mary Josephine run the school for orphans from the region but have received some children from as far away as Kathmandu. All classes are taught in English and the children we meet speak confidently and are wonderfully polite. Very few of them have ever met a European before and it's great to see how enthusiastic they are to shake our hands and ask us questions. We just feel like ordinary people on bikes but to them we're celebrities.



In the scrum at the 7th Day Adventist School

In the morning, in return for our room and board, we agree to show the children some photos and talk a bit about our journeys. It's a shame that my volunteer points to Ukraine when I ask him to show me where England is on a world map but the rest of the presentation seems to go down well. The highlight, however, is seeing their principal riding around the playground on the back of the tandem with a swarm of cheering children chasing after us. After an extensive photoshoot with the staff we're presented with some polo shirts with the school logo on the front and "Teacher" written across the back. I hadn't realised teacher training was so easy!



Taking assembly at the 7th Day

Adventist School, Borobisha



The staff of the SDA School,
Borobisha



Going for a ride with Raju Jacob, The
Principal



Teachers on the move

The dual carriageway continues after Borobisha, slicing villages in two in many places. Sometimes a policeman helps people to cross from one side to the other but more often they have to just chance their luck and run for it. A move made more risky when you've got a couple of buffalo in tow. The road is only three years old, and there are still plenty of places where there's work to be done to complete it but Raju Jacob told us it's already had an impact on the region, allowing rapid expansion of the towns and a much faster supply route for the trucks.

The dusty road takes us over numerous small rivers, some dotted with wide flat bottomed fishing boats to cope with the shallow water. In other places the fishermen just stand up to their waists holding rods and with a clay pot strapped to their chests to put their catch in.



Fishing in the shallow water

Arriving in Bongaigaon, it's the Catholic Church that comes to our aid for the evening. At the St Aloysius Seminary, a school for prospective priests, we meet Father Biju Joseph and Father Manu Augustine and after asking if we can pitch our tents outside the nearby cathedral they instead offer us rooms in the boarding house. Over dinner they explain that the training to become a priest is a lengthy process of around 10-15 years. The seminary houses 65 boys who are at college age and will progress from here to study theology at university before further training at a placement in a parish that could be anywhere in India.



Father Biju Joseph and
Father Manu Augustine

In the morning we get to hear the boys singing hymns accompanied by the eclectic combination of an electronic church organ and Indian tabla drums.

After Bongaigaon we get to turn off the busy main road onto a much more pleasant route that brings us to the banks of the Brahmaputra River. One of the largest rivers in the world it takes a 2.5km long bridge to get us across it. Freshwater dolphins occasionally bob to the surface in the murky brown water while a long freight train rumbles along the deck below us.



The bridge over the Brahmaputra

We're now venturing deep into the tribal territories of North East India. Tall forests of banana trees surround dusty towns where the sight of four westerners on bikes brings the bustling streets to a standstill. While we tuck into our lunch people jostle to get a better view of us eating, using their camera phones to capture what surely must be some of the dulllest videos ever made. A large proportion of the staring crowds chew languidly on the popular betel nut. It seems to numb their senses, their eyes are glazed over and they slur their words. Like their teeth, the streets are stained from the excess of crimson saliva that they constantly have to spit out. It's a horrible habit and we try to avoid anyone with the tell tale bright red grin.



The banana market at Daranggiri



A double cycle draws a big crowd in Assam

Our road is now a corridor through the humid jungle. We see a man riding an elephant but he is more amazed to see us than we are to see him. Father Biju Joseph had suggested we aim for Boko where we would find the Don Bosco School, also run by the Catholic Church to see if they can provide a room for the night, which they do. It's the main night of Dewali and the battle ground of fireworks and bangers rages from early evening to late at night. We wanted to go out and take a closer look but find the gates of the school have been firmly locked. One of the priests explains that it's too dangerous to

go out at night due to the risk of muggers, drunks and stampeding wild elephants. Just last year someone was trampled by a startled animal while on their way home after dark.



Heavy traffic ahead



Spot the elephant

The road gets progressively busier as we approach Guwahati, the capital city of Assam Province. We avoid the centre by racing round the ring road, stopping only to visit a Decathlon

store, a little slice of neat and ordered European familiarity amongst the Indian chaos.



The first Decathlon store to be opened in NE India

After Guwahati we leave Assam and enter Meghalaya. A relatively small province that encompasses the hills and high plateau above the Bangladeshi border. The road rises off the flat plains and we let Bjorn and Jens disappear up the hill while we get on with the task in hand at tandem speed. Although there were plenty of churches in Assam, Christianity was still the minority religion with Hindu and tribal beliefs being more common. However the missions had been more successful in the Meghalaya region so Catholicism is the dominant faith. Every village has a church tower peeking over the roof tops and in the town of Namphu we find the St Paul's Catholic School. Two German students are on a year's placement here so Bjorn and Jens enjoy a conversation in their native language over a cup of tea while we wait for the Padre.



Don Bosco School, Boko

Meghalaya has three main tribal groups: Kazi, Garo and Jantia, each with its own cultural traditions and language. There are also smaller tribes, again with their own language differences with at least 60 identifiable languages being spoken across the province. This is a Kazi area so we use “Khublei” for hello and our favourite phrase for thank you so far: “Khublei Shiboom”. If we were to move a few km along a different road we’d have to learn an entirely different greeting.

After breakfast with Father Jose, one of the nicest and friendliest people we’ve ever met, we’re back into the climb. The soundtrack to accompany our heavy breathing is a shrill, tinitus like tone emanating from the bushes. It sounds like an electrical alarm but is in fact one of the thousands of annoying jungle insects.



Father Jose at St Paul's
Catholic School, Namphu

The approach to Shillong is predictably busy. Like the heart of an ant hill, everyone seems to be crowding up towards the capital of Meghalaya. The final, steep climb eventually subsides and we get directions to the Don Bosco Technical College where Father Augustine is waiting for us. Father Jose had called to say we were on our way so a room has already been prepared for us to stay in. Just the easy and relaxing arrival we needed after the efforts of the morning.



Fish market in Shillong

At the risk of seeming ungrateful we don't make use of their accommodation that night. Instead we leave the bikes and take a shared taxi down to Cherrapunji, 50km further south. This town claims to be the wettest place on earth with the highest annual rainfall ever recorded. In 1861 26,461mm fell on this plateau.

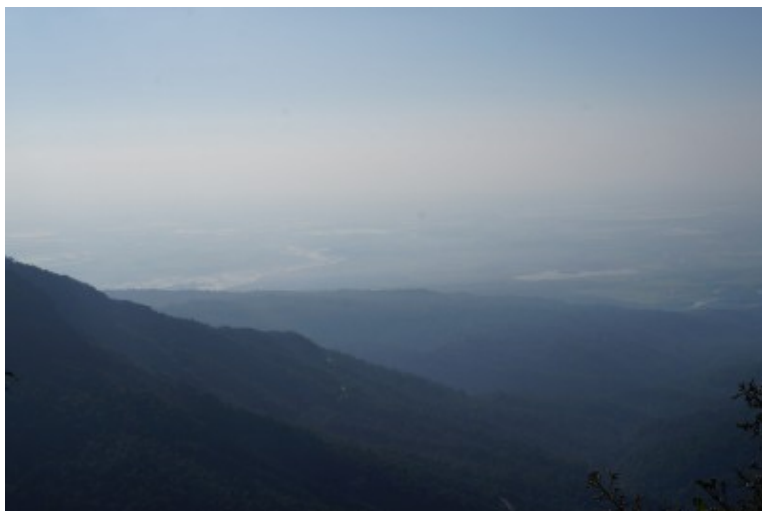


Photo courtesy of Wikipedia

We go in search of yet another Don Bosco Catholic School but when we find it Father Roy is a bit more suspicious of the four foreign visitors on his doorstep. Without our bikes our plight is much less obvious but after we explain that Fathers Jose and Augustine had sent us he soon welcomes us in and offers some floor space for us to sleep on.

We weren't in Cherrapunji to enjoy the rainfall, we get enough of that back home, and besides it's been warm and dry here for weeks. The reason for coming here was to see the famous living tree root bridges in the villages below. On our way to the village of Tyrna we get a view off the plateau to the Bangladeshi plains below. It's more water than land, a country built around one of the the largest river deltas on the planet

and collecting the runoff from the Himalayas, parts of China and most of Northern India. If we'd been down there trying to cross it as planned then a boat would have been more useful than a bicycle.



Looking down onto a soggy Bangladesh



Looking back up from Tyrna

From Tyrna we set off on foot down a never ending staircase that drops us steeply into the dense undergrowth. On either side of the path enormous spiders hang threateningly from their webs. The largest are about the size of my hand with yellow and black hazard stripes across their backs implying it's probably best not to get too close.



Dropping down from Tyrna



Not a place for arachnophobes

The first of the root bridges spans a 20m wide, shallow gorge. The aerial roots of the banyan fig trees are initially trained along a bamboo pole and carefully looped and woven together until eventually they take hold on the other side and form a useable structure. It takes around 15 years to get to the stage where someone can walk across but after that the roots continue to grow into the walkway and hand rails, becoming a tangled mass across the gorge so it just gets stronger and stronger. This one is about 200 years old and is as sturdy as

iron.



The longest living tree
root bridge in the world



Bjorn inspects nature's engineering

Some more modern steel bridges take us across a wider gorge to see a unique 'double decker' root bridge. Also nearly 200 years old these living structures will almost certainly outlast their artificial counterparts. However it's not a building technique for the impatient. We see a new bridge in the early stages of being grown but we'll have to wait at

least 10 years before we can come back and walk across it.



Kirsty found the man-made bridges far more terrifying to walk across



A unique 'Double Decker' living root bridge



While we admire the combined handiwork of man and nature, Jens is tipped off about a pool further up the path and an alternative route back up onto the plateau. 30 minutes later we're splashing about in one of the most idyllic swim spots any of us has ever seen.



Paradise pool

A waterfall cascades down through a cleft in the rock into a crystal clear swimming pool lined with enormous boulders. Vividly colourful butterflies dance across the surface of the water and briefly rest at the edges. We swim round behind the waterfall for a powershower to remember.



This beautiful butterfly was about 7cm long

Refreshed and invigorated we climb back up to the path and continue on but the trail begins to deteriorate. After another 30 minutes we reach another, enormous waterfall that has come crashing down in stages from high up on the rim of the plateau, 1000m above us. It also marks the end of the path.



We backtrack all the way to the pool and find where we went wrong then climb stairs for another 2 hours. As it begins to get dark a mild sense of panic sets in as I realise there's a chance we'll be stuck in a spider infested jungle overnight with no shelter and no light. Just before I begin looking for wood to build a bivouac and light a fire we emerge into the gloom at the top of the plateau. Relief washes over us like the crystal clear waterfalls now far below us.



A pineapple taking shape
in the undergrowth



Light fading fast on the endless
climb back up to the plateau

We catch a lift back to Shillong and finally make use of the room that Father Augustine had prepared for us.

The next day is a much needed rest day. The hike had been more strenuous than we'd expected but there's also a medical issue that needs addressing. For the past 4 days an uncomfortable sore patch has developed in the high friction area at the top

of my left leg that spends its days in contact with the saddle. This got worse to become a welt and then three angry infected boils. The final two days into Shillong would have been more pleasant if I'd filled my shorts with hot coals. I'd had to adopt an awkward side saddle position on the bike which was neither comfortable nor effective for hill climbing but was the only way I could bear to sit on the bike. Common sense would say that I should have stopped and let it calm down a couple of days before Shillong but sense isn't my strong point. Besides, we had to keep pace with the Germans!

So it's a visit to the hospital to be swabbed and dressed and prescribed with more antibiotics and pain killers leaving with strict instructions not to ride for 5 days. It's a shame they didn't prescribe logic and patience too.

The rest of our Sunday is spent looking at closed up shops and watching parishioners visiting the local church in their finest suits and frocks with bibles tucked under their arms. Turn back the clock 50 years and most British towns would have looked the same in a time when Sunday really was observed as the Sabbath.

Believing that I know best, I ignore the doctor's advice and decide we should continue when Monday morning arrives. The pills help a little but I still have to perch very awkwardly on the bike, right on the nose of the saddle to make it bearable. Large doses of Ibuprofen get me through the day as we traverse through what claims to be the Scotland of the East. Most likely this title is the result of the amount of rainfall that falls each year but looking at the pine trees, tussocked moorland of thick grasses across the rolling hills it's easy to imagine we're North of Hadrian's Wall. Is that a bag piper we can hear up ahead? No, it's the whining gearbox of another Tata truck straining up the hill with black smoke belching out of it to fill up our lungs.



Haggis pakora anyone?

After Jowai we take a left turn and the road improves both in the quality of the surface but also with a dramatic reduction in traffic. The sun begins to tuck itself behind the horizon so we ask about sleeping in the next available church. We find it's not possible without permission from the local tribal chief who's not there right now so we have to ride on. It may not have helped that we greeted them with the Kazi word 'Khublei' but they are actually Pnar and use 'Hoi' to say hello.



The smallest man in
India

Our saviours are the police force in the next village of Raliang. Seeing four tired cyclists arrive at their outpost, one with a slight hobble, they offer some floor space in the police station while apologising for the lack of facilities on offer. We take it in turns to brave a cold water bucket shower in one of the policemen's houses, it comprises just two tiny rooms with a washing area behind a curtain. We're then driven back up to the dhaba in the main part of the village for dinner before an extensive photoshoot with each and every policeman and then finally being allowed to get some sleep. We're not the first cyclists to pay them a visit though as a British rider on a fat tyre bike passed through at the beginning of the year. With these encounters as their only contact with Europeans they must think we all ride bikes around the world for a living.



The Raliang chief of police



Our cell for the night

My common sense finally kicks in once we leave Raliang and I vow to stop at the next decent sized town to rest properly and heal up. On the map there appears to be something useful in about 20km so I pray for an easy morning of riding and then being able to put my feet up (and slightly apart). Instead the settlements get more and more basic and the road gets progressively worse. The point on the map we thought was a town turns out to be a collection of huts made from woven sticks and straw with herds of animals and small children patrolling the mud tracks between them. An extraordinary looking place but not somewhere we'd find reliable medical care. The inhabitants stare open mouthed as we trundle past on a road that threatens to loosen every single bolt on the bike.

I wince with every bump.



Meghalayan villagers with
typical beetle nut
stained lips

A bridge takes us across a river, past a large dam and back into Assam before we ride up and over a steep hill to arrive at a truck stop for breakfast where we tuck into chana and chipati and chai.



Dam on the Assam border

Bjorn and Jens have some distance to cover to be able to get up into the next state of Nagaland then back down to the Myanmar border in time to make their pre-arranged crossing date. There's no point in us holding them back any longer today so it's time to part company. It's been great riding with them for the past 10 days and together we'd got to this point a lot quicker than if we were on our own. But more importantly, their no-budget accommodation approach has re-introduced some of the sense of the adventure that I felt we'd lost before Kathmandu where we were relying on hotels. Having no idea where we were going to stay each night was something that I'd been missing. It's true that pushing hard for 120km+ each day in the hot, humid conditions had led to my current condition but it was my fault for not taking better care of myself.



Bjorn and Jens

With shouts of “auf Wiedersehen”, they speed off in a cloud of dust and we continue on for 15km into Umrongso. Perhaps we lacked the charm of the Germans because there's no room at the inn when we enquire at the catholic school so instead have to check in to the Lily Inn. Loud music right outside our room is not the relaxing atmosphere we were after but then there's a knock on the door and three teenagers invite us to join in the birthday party. We're treated like guests of honour and dance

the evening away, much to the amusement of the other adults who aren't so willing to show us their moves. Outside, fireworks and music signal the start of another Hindu festival while around the corner we peek over a fence to watch the preparations for a wedding that's due to take place tomorrow. This unassuming town seems to be surprisingly lively tonight and everyone we speak to is thrilled that we're there to experience it all.



The party girls



pre-wedding celebrations in Umrongso

Much as we were warming to Umrongso, it's still not quite suitable for the extended rest that I need, so very early the next morning the tandem is strapped to the roof of a Sumo 4x4 and we endure the 8 hour drive down to Silchar. We get to experience the awful roads from a bench seat over the stiff back axle and there's a few times when we wish we had our helmets on after we're launched into the ceiling.



Umrongso



This river stained blue by the limestone rocks on its bed

We knew that there was another Don Bosco School in Silchar and hoped that they could help us out. The mere thought of cycling was just too painful to even contemplate now so we had to walk 4km to get to the school gates, offers of help being handed

out by several people along the way. It takes less than a minute for Father Raphael and Brother Reggie to welcome us in and find us a room to stay in. This wonderful institution has come to our rescue yet again which is a relief as looking at the state of my leg with a combination of revulsion and sympathy, Kirsty predicts we might be here for some time.



Don Bosco to the rescue once again

While riding with Bjorn and Jens it was appropriate that I'd been reading *Three Men on the Bummel*, Jerome K Jerome's amusing account of travelling through pre-war Germany on a tandem. His observations regarding the typical German characteristics made me smile as there were more than a few similarities in our riding buddies. The book closes with this paragraph which seems to sum up our journey nicely:

"'A Bummel',' I Explained, "I should describe as a a journey, long or short, without an end; the only thing regulating it being the necessity of getting back within a given time to the point from which one started. Sometimes it is through busy streets, and sometimes through the fields and lanes; sometimes we can be spared for a few hours, and sometimes for a few days. But long or short, but here or there, our thoughts are ever on the running of the sand. We nod and smile to many as we pass; with some we stop and talk awhile; and with a few we walk a little way. We have been much interested, and often a

little tired. But on the whole we have had a pleasant time, and are sorry when 'tis over."

Our Bummel is far from over but it's time to rest awhile.



Get Lucky or be Dum



Ortlieb's new panniers look a bit heavy

Escape from Kathmandu / A Short Walk in the Annapurna Sanctuary

Sometimes what seems to be a small decision can have a big impact. Sitting in a roadside stall in a small Indian town called Nagina that happened to have WiFi, I was trying to arrange postage of our next parcel of parts with my brother via a WhatsApp call. All the couriers that he'd spoken to refused to deliver to the post office box address in Kathmandu that we'd been given by a friend of a friend and we were running short on time to get things sorted out. In the end we elected to use Royal Mail, split the parts into two packages to meet their International Service weight limit and hope that the estimated minimum delivery time of 5 days would be correct. This decision would cost us nearly four weeks.



View of Kathmandu from
Swayambhunath (Monkey
Temple)



Swayambhunath (Monkey Temple)

6th October 2015 – 1st November 2015

Having arrived in Kathmandu on the 6th day after the parcel left my brother's hands there was of course no sign of it. Not a problem as we had our other favourite city pasttime of visiting embassies to keep us occupied. If TripAdvisor included international embassies we'd be star reviewers by now. In summary our experiences were as follows:

Indian Embassy, Kathmandu

Convenient online application is flawed by inflexible staff at the visa processing centre. Photos have to be the correct size to the nearest mm, forms must be filled out in intricate detail and you must have exactly the correct cash to pay the non-refundable fee. The price for UK citizens is very high (\$140 each) and the 7 day wait also spoils the experience. An additional letter was required to be able to get a triple entry visa instead of the standard single entry.

[We needed new visas as we'd spent longer than planned in

Himachal while Kirsty recovered leaving too little time to get across to Myanmar. Tourist visas can't be extended either, even if you ask nicely]

Bangladeshi Embassy, Kathmandu

*

Only open from 9am to 12pm. Can't issue visas for travellers using land borders, only those arriving at an airport. Despite their own website claiming buying a visa on arrival is possible at all land borders they in fact could only tell us we could get it from Benepol, some 500km out of our way. We waited over an hour to be told all of this and left empty-handed. [We later decided to skip Bangladesh all together after two terrorist attacks, targeting non-Asians and claimed by ISIS put the country on high alert. Our friends Pete and Josh cycled through with a police escort with sirens blaring making the experience highly stressful and less than enjoyable.]

Myanmar Embassy, Kathmandu

Loses a star only because of its location which is at the top of a steep hill and nowhere near the point on Google Maps where it claims to be. Other than this the staff were friendly, efficient and issued our 28 day visas the day after we handed in our applications and \$20 fee. [From others' experiences Kathmandu seems to be much easier than Delhi for getting a Myanmar visa].



Another new ticket to ride

Many people will remember the footage shot in Kathmandu immediately after the earthquakes in April. The impression given was of widespread devastation in the capital and we'd braced ourselves expecting to see lots of evidence of the damage. In reality the buildings that were affected seem to be in localised areas with the majority of the city apparently unharmed. Sadly it's a lot of the historical structures that were hit hardest. The main Durbar Square has huge piles of rubble in place of temples that had stood for hundreds of years. Gaping cracks have opened up on walls and you have to dodge timber supports that are propping up some precarious repair work in several streets.



Earthquake damage near Kathmandu

Durbar Square



A lot of Durbar Square is still standing though

One of the saddest sights is the Boudhanath Stupa, one of the landmarks of the city and the one of largest Buddhist stupas in the world. The 'quake didn't destroy it but caused enough damage to make the towering top section with its iconic Buddha eyes so unstable that it has had to be dismantled. One day it'll be rebuilt, but not without a lot of hard work and with the need for a lot of funding.



The headless Boudhanath stupa



A smaller, but still complete stupa

There are many NGOs and charities working in Nepal which means there is a busy expat community. This also means there is a popular Hash House Harriers running club: The Himalayan Hash House Harriers. I join them for the weekly outing that takes us on a fantastic route on the southern outskirts of the city, across streams, up hills and through rural suburbs. Two wiry Nepalese set the pace at the front and are uncatchable on the climbs. During the customary 'refreshments' after the run I chat to a few of the other members from Poland, Italy, Germany, England and Australia. All of them either working for various aid agencies or studying crisis management.



Every doorway houses a shrine or a shop draped in crisp packets and biscuits

Although the earthquake was 6 months ago there are still

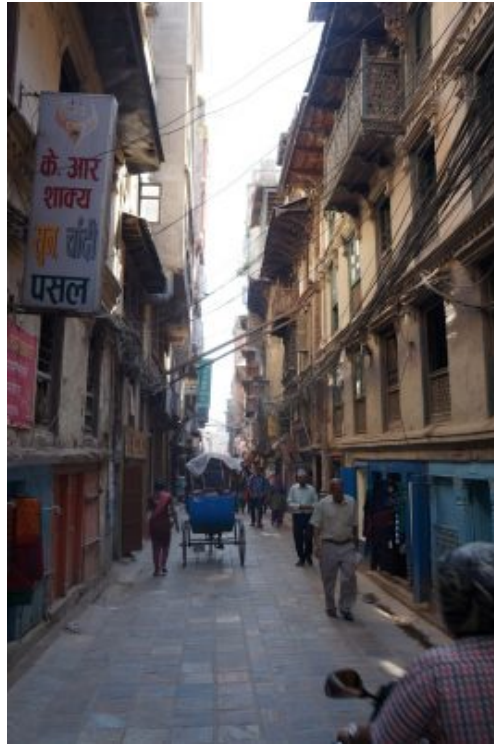
hundreds of people living in tents or sharing the homes of friends and family. It's a massive task to build more permanent shelters but with winter fast approaching it needs to be done quickly. Unfortunately the fuel crisis has put a halt to the effort as there are now not enough vehicles to transport material out to the remote areas worst affected. Container loads of supplies are also stuck at the border, unable to cross due to the restrictions put in place by the Indian Government. A lot of people see this as a bigger crisis than the earthquake itself given that the whole country is affected and the overall impact on businesses and ultimately the lives of those who might have to spend a cold winter in a polythene tent is yet to be seen.



Pedal power surviving the fuel crisis. Bike shops have become very busy.



During our prolonged stay a new Prime Minister is elected and also their first female President but there seems to be no end in sight for the constitutional dispute. Meanwhile we watch shutters close on dhabas and cafes that have run out of cooking gas, taxi fares double or triple due to black market fuel prices and the number of tourists is a fraction of what it should be during the peak season.



The quiet streets of
Thamel

We do our bit by supporting the restaurants that are still open as frequently as possible. We spend a morning with Social Tours learning how to make momos and then sampling our handiwork. Another morning is spent at a yoga class discovering just how inflexible it's possible to get after cycling for so long and not stretching once.



Kirsty loves momos



Cooking class with Asmita



Can we eat them now?

A few of the tour companies have been plugging a social media campaign to encourage visitors back to Nepal. Tourism is by far the biggest source of income in the country so it's vital that people realise that, despite the earthquakes everything is open for business. They want us to spread the message and encourage you to take a trip to #NEPALnow!



Supporting the Nepal Now social media campaign

After 10 days waiting (16 since it left the UK) there's still

no sign of the parcel so it's time for an excursion to help pass the time. We board a bus for the next biggest city, Pokhara with a couple of rucksacks and a map in hand of the famous Poon Hill trek.



Banana sellers hassle the occupants of the buses as soon as they stop

Nepal is undoubtedly one the finest destinations on earth for those who like to walk. The mountain scenery is just incredible and the network of paths can be picked to cater for just about everyone, from leisure ramblers to the most serious of mountaineers. The route we had chosen took us into the Annapurna Sanctuary from Nayapol to Ghorepani then across to Ghandruk and down through Tolka to finish in Phedi. A moderate 5 day 'tea house' trek, so called because all the food and accommodation is available at regular intervals at tea houses in the numerous villages along the way so no need to carry much gear.



Cyclists becoming hikers



Annapurna South peeping
over the hills

This doesn't stop people packing the kitchen sink though and we pass many groups with an army of porters labouring away under the load of several backpacks, dry bags and holdalls strapped together and slung from a strap around their heads. Despite the unbelievable burden they are almost always 100m ahead of their clients and skip up the steep climbs in

battered trainers, not a single Vibram sprung Gore Tex lined walking boot between them.



Nepalese porters, the strongest men in the world



Our host for a night at

the Annapurna View Guest House



Tea time with a view



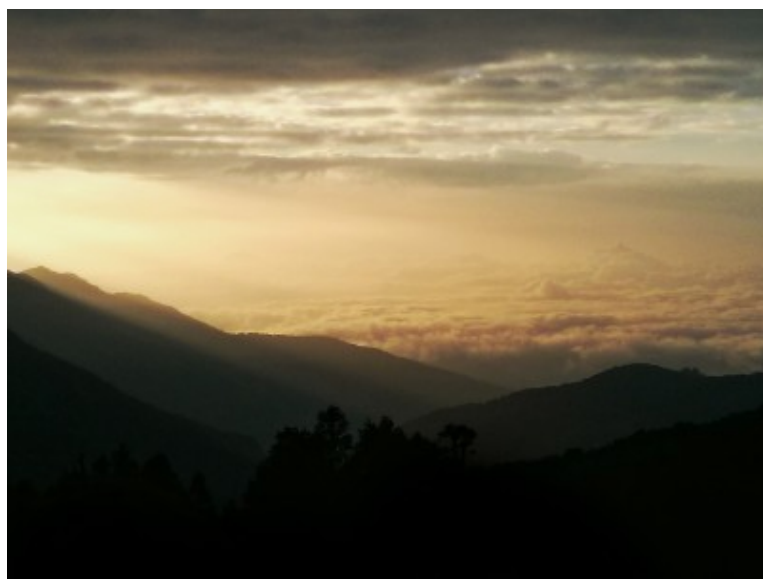
Namaste!

The highlight of the walk is the climb up Poon Hill at the dawn of the third day. Leaving Ghorepani at 4:30am we wind up the narrow path by torchlight, reminding me of night running exploits in Leigh Woods. At the top a crowd gathers to watch

the sun slowly reveal the huge Annapurna range in a magnificent 270 degree amphitheatre of mountains. Our 'hill' top viewing platform is 3200m high, a mountain by most standards, but the frosted peaks towering in front of us are over 8000m reducing it to an insignificant lump.



Ghorepani, the village at the base of Poon Hill



Dawn on Poon Hill



In front of Annapurna 1 (8091m) and
Annapurna South (7,219m)



Dhaulagiri range (8167m)



Annapurna Panorama



Dhaulagiri

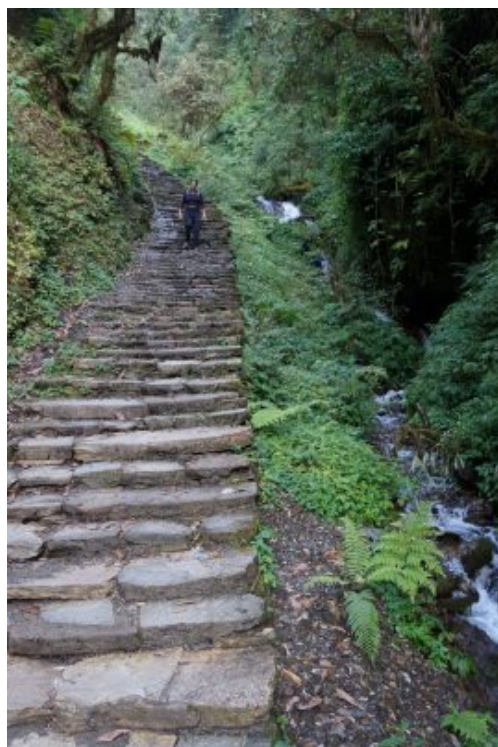
As well as providing a route for trekkers, the paths are the only links in and out of most of the small villages clustered on the hillside. There are no roads so everything that the people on the mountains need has to be carried in and out by horse or porter.



Nepalese ponies, the strongest horses in the world



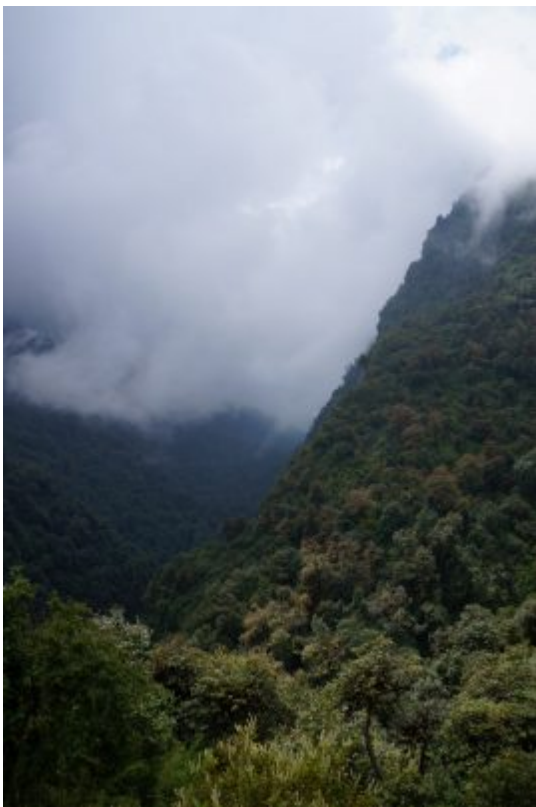
Just constructing the paths themselves must have been a mighty task with hundreds of metres of stone staircases laid into the steep hillside and threading their way through beautiful orange and yellow rhododendron forests. Climbing up was slow but steady, cycling muscles seem to be well adapted to going up steps. Coming down is more of a challenge as it wakes up muscles that have been mostly dormant for the last year or so. Kirsty gets an involuntary shaky leg action that Elvis would be proud of.



3967...3968...3969...

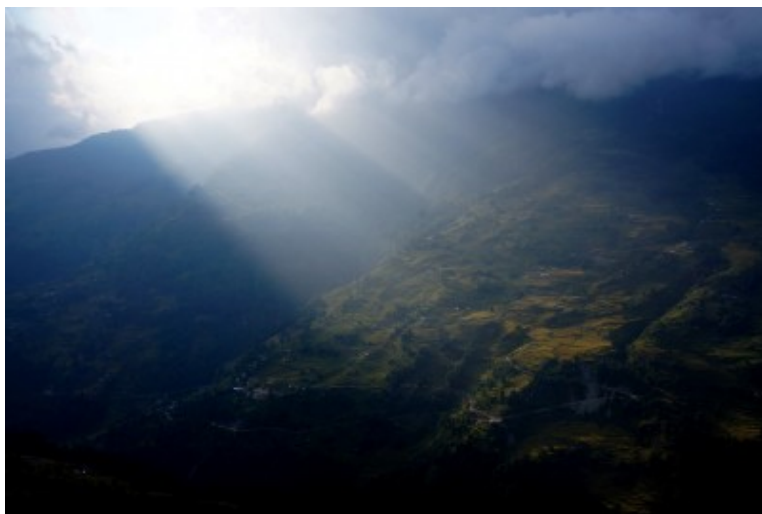


Rhododendron forest





Happy hiker



Sunshine on the terraces



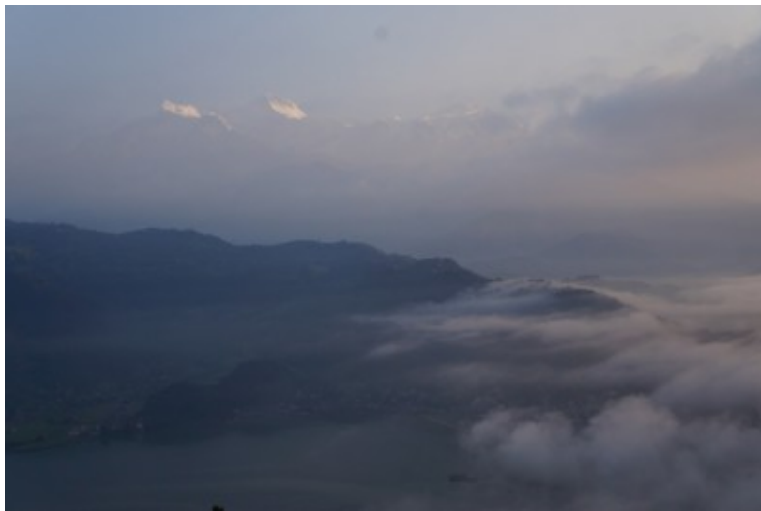
Entire hillsides have
been cut into terraces



Other than a new set of aching muscles, the trek made a refreshing change from pedalling, almost feeling like a mini holiday within our maxi-holiday. The simplicity of carrying a few bits of kit on our backs and heading into the hills also gets my mind racing on ideas for foot-bound adventures, something I'd written off in the past as being too slow but now I can see the appeal.



View from Pokhara World
Peace Pagoda at dawn



Dawn over Pokhara

The biggest festival in the busy Nepali calendar is Dashain and it's been slowly building up over the days that we were in Kathmandu but reaches its climax once we get back to Pokhara after the trek. Everywhere there are children flying kites, playing on huge bamboo 'Pin' swings and families enjoying a stroll round the lake with foreheads caked in red paint and rice. This is their equivalent of Christmas Day.



Not a typing error as it really is 2072 in the Nepalese calendar.



Bamboo 'pin' swing



Red painted children celebrating Dashain



Phewa Lake, Pokhara

Another important ritual for Dashain is the sacrifice of animals and we'd seen herds of goats being traded on the road side then going home on the roofs of buses to meet an unfortunate end.



A goat on its first and final bus ride



Sharing out the meat for Dashain

By the time we get back to Kathmandu it's been nearly four weeks since the parcels were sent. We've come to the end of our Nepalese visas but it's an easy process to get another 15 days added for an additional \$30 each at the immigration office. It's possible to stay for a total of 5 months if we want though of course we hope that we won't need to make full use of this option.



Pashupatinath Temples



Sadhu at Pashupatinath Temple

We pay a visit to the General Post Office to try and get an update on where the parcels could possibly be. Any confidence that we'd ever see our precious goods is quickly diminished as

we're sent from room 21 to room 33 to room 32 to room 31 and finally to window 5. The wild goose chase takes us through desolate rooms stacked with dusty sacks of mail and battered pigeon holes. No-one seems to have a clue when our parcels are likely to arrive and if they do where we should collect them from. For all we know it's at the bottom of one of the mountains of packages that we'd seen but for now we have to leave empty-handed.



Kathmandu General Post Office

Kathmandu is a great city if you need outdoors kit so we take the opportunity to replace, repair and upgrade where we need to. I find a machine shop that fabricates a new head for our click stand which had come to the end of its life having propped up the heavy tandem one too many times. It's like a full reset making sure everything we have is back to full working order for the next leg of the journey.



My status on Trip Advisor improves thanks to the numerous reviews of our now extensive knowledge of restaurants in Kathmandu. We're also making new friends with other guests at Elbrus Home Hostel where we're staying including fellow British cycle tourists Frances, Graham and Sarah and an interesting chat with Roeland from The Netherlands.

One evening we're joined by Sebastian from Medevac, who'd I'd met at the Hash run, and his friends Celine and Sophie. Sebastian is thinking about cycling back to his home in Germany next year so is keen to glean advice and inspiration from us. In return we get to find out a bit more about how emergency relief operations work and also get an invite to a weekend of rafting and canyoning.



A yeti with a man in a furry white suit

Then one rainy morning I head out for a run and decide to pop into the post office on the way, just in case there's been a miraculous delivery. It seems miracles can happen as when I find a lady sitting in front of a computer in the corner of an otherwise empty office she punches in my tracking number and tells me both parcels have landed that very morning. By 2 o'clock in the afternoon, having presented my passport and without any of the expected customs charges to pay, both boxes are under my arm and I head back to show Kirsty. It's like Christmas, only it's actually Dashain.

The most valuable item is a new front dynamo hub, replaced very efficiently by Schmidt under warranty. I hand over the front wheel to Sonam of Dawn to Dusk bike shop to have it rebuilt. Sonam is largely responsible for pioneering mountain biking in Nepal and came highly recommended by our friend Chrissie who was taken under his wing while she lived in Kathamandu.



Sonam, Kathmandu's greatest

mountain biker

So suddenly we had everything we needed: Visas, bike parts, kit, and just as we felt like permanent residents of Kathmandu! But having agreed to the weekend of activities with Sebastian we had to stay for a couple more days. As Kirsty keeps telling me, we shouldn't rush.



The weekend includes abseiling down waterfalls, sliding down streams and jumping off cliffs, all great fun. The rafting is also a step up from my previous experience of white water which extended to the Grand Canyon Rapids ride at Alton Towers. The adrenaline keeps flowing on the ride home too as we take to the roof of the bus as all the seats are taken down below. It's not a usual sight to see westerners in the 'cheap seats' which amuses the locals as we speed past, singing songs from the roof top.



The canyoning crew



Don't look down



Just like rowing. Only a
bit bumpier.



Bus surfing

As has always been the case, these enforced stops are frustrating but give us time to do things that we would otherwise have missed. To have visited Nepal and not been on a trek for instance would have been regrettable and already we're thinking about coming back to take on something a bit longer. With the benefit of hindsight we could have found another address that a courier would have been able to deliver to within a few days, saving us time and money. But at the time that the decision had to be made we opted for the simpler, standard mail service and in return we had a much more thorough experience of Kathmandu and Nepal which we can thank Royal Mail for. Now onwards, back to India.

N→**NEVER**

E→**END**

P→**PEACE**

A→**AND**

L→**LOVE**