

Nepal

Earth's Eden



It's 6 a.m. The bikes are feeling strong as we negotiate potholed tar around the town of Butwai in the dry Nepali lowlands. We pass a humble white-washed stupa (temple) on our left. Above our heads, attached to a long line, yellow, red, blue, and white prayers gently flutter. We are steadily climbing and easily find our route into the mountains. As we head northeast, our dark visors diffuse the pink light of the slowly rising sun.

Text and Photography:
Simon and Lisa Thomas

Rounding a tight bend, we stand on the pegs to manage a patch of rough tar. Skirting the edge of a long valley, the scene is glorious. Trails of smoke rising from the bushfires on the steep banks are caught by the sun in gentle orange, giving a warm glow to the landscape.

A Sense of Serenity

We both feel at ease for the first time in what seems like ages. The change from India to Nepal is like putting down your can of RedBull and picking up a cup of tea. The mountainous north Nepali landscape is home to eight of the ten tallest peaks on earth, including the highest, Mount Everest. The world's deepest gorge, the Kali Gandaki, is about 200 miles north of here.

Crammed between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India, 26 million people eke out subsistence in Nepal, living on the flanks of the mighty Himalayas.

We are riding to the country's second best known town, Pokhara, most famed as the Himalayan launch pad for walkers and trekkers alike. In contrast to their Indian counterparts, truck drivers here surprise us with courtesy. A few even stop to let us pass on the narrower, steeper turns.

The sweeping curves of the H10 cut a winding route into the contours of the hillsides. As it has done for millennia, the fast flowing Seti River below slices impressive canyons into the valley floor. This landscape is a motorcyclist's nirvana. There is no other place on Earth where the elevation rises a dramatic 20,000 feet within 18 miles.

On a wide dusty bend, we pull over and swap stories with four leather-clad riders

on Royal Enfields. Upon learning our destination, one recommends the Sacred Valley Guest House. "The breakfasts are the best in town, and the view... well, you'll see," he says with a wry smile.

Riding the spine of a long ridgeway, our jaws stay dropped as all around us an intricate patchwork of terraced fields extends into the distance. We fight to keep our concentration on the unyielding curves that come at us one after another in quickening succession.

Coming Home for the First Time

Trampled by hoards of adventure seekers, the smooth asphalt ends as we ride into Pokhara. High above the town, Machhapuchhre makes a spectacular backdrop, its perfect peak reflected in the calm water of Phewa Lake. Dozens of brightly painted rowboats wait on the shallow banks to transport Buddhist devotees to the Idyllic Island temple in the lake's center.

The tall flower-festooned metal gates of the Sacred Valley Guest House swing open. "Welcome. You are home," shouts Vishnu over the noise of our engines. We quickly throw our dirty bags and kit into the simple white-washed room before heading outside. Two ice-cold bottles of Everest beer baptize our homecoming. What a perfect way to wind up a stunning day of motorcycle riding.

The next morning we enjoy a full English breakfast of fried bread, crispy bacon, beans, eggs, and mushrooms—a great change from the noodle and rice diet we've been on.

Pokhara's streets are bustling with would-be guides who gently cajole new arrivals hoping for a commission. Dozens of stalls



spill their wares onto the streets. Along the length of Pokhara's central street, shops brim with bogus Mountain Hardware, North Face, and Colombia logos. Above our heads a dozen paragliders float high on the thermals.

High in the Sky at the Top of Sarangkot

With our bags stowed at the guesthouse, we're riding light and negotiating the tight dirt turns of the ridge track that leads to the top of Sarangkot Peak. Just five miles from town, the lofty viewpoint may allow us to see the panoramic sweep of Himalayan peaks. Zigzagging up the ever-tightening switchbacks, our rear wheels skip and slide over the stones and sink into deep patches of fine dust on the corners. Lisa

is struggling with her vertigo as she darts a look left and down. Half a mile below us, Phewa Lake, the one-mile stretch of crystal-clear Himalayan water, disappears into the haze of the valley. As the track levels out we go through the tiny village of Sarangkot. Perched high in the sky, it's an odd mix of small wooden huts and gray painted concrete buildings. We walk the last 1,500 feet up a set of concrete steps to the overlook. Our motor-cross boots are heavy, and Nepalese soldiers smile a greeting as we pass through their camp. An ancient kot (hill fort) is now a Nepalese army station, so we're careful not to take pictures here.

The vista is stunning, although the peaks we'd hoped to see are still playing "hard

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to get." An icy breeze chills our faces, and despite the thick clouds, we sense the immensity of the Himalayas. One hundred feet below us, four paragliders lift their bright chutes in the air and make a mad dash for the cliff's edge. Within seconds they've swapped their awkward run for effortless flight. We watch as each soars higher than the last before gently touching down miles below us on a grassy patch along the lake's edge.

In the Eye of an Ice Storm

Pokhara doesn't see us for a few days as we catch up with emails and the like. As we head west, once again laden with gear, we

slowly bounce and wobble over the deep channels cut into an unsealed track. To our left, a young man with oxen hand-ploughs a quagmire of mud in a rice paddy. Nearly vertical banks of dense foliage rise to our right before the valley opens and we ride into the small village of Pame. Low wooden buildings line the main street, and the children run and wave excitedly as we pass. Beyond the village in a wide green valley, we turn a gentle left and take a narrow gravel track to a lone, squat, concrete building. The worn blue-tent symbol on it caught our attention.

This seldom-used campground surround-

ed by rice fields will be our base for the next week. We quickly set up our tent, throw our bags inside, and pull out the pots and pans. Two boulders serve as table and chairs, and a simple wood and straw shelter nearby provides some respite from the afternoon heat.

The temperature plummets abruptly, and the bright light of just three minutes ago is gone. Heavy clouds now obscure the sun. We rush to move our dinnerware and stove under cover as an ice storm hits and the wind starts to howl. The force of a hailstone hitting my head buckles my knees, however, within seconds I'm back underneath the straw refuge with Lisa watching the chaos. As the squall intensifies, hailstones the size of baseballs are bouncing high off the ground and flattening a field of young corn across the way. The whipping wind threatens to lift our tent, but with enough pins in the ground we're saved from that calamity. We're stunned to see no damage has been done to our bikes or tent. Local villagers are not so lucky, and many of the aged vehicles that line Pame's lone street show real destruction. We buy a small bottle of Nepali rum, and back at our tent; we pour ourselves two good measures. "Do we have any ice?" Lisa jokes as we mix in some cola. In defiance of the tempest, I pick up two large hailstones from the ground and casually plop them into our cups. Every storm has a silver lining.

Dinner Guests in the Mountains

Now riding east of Pokhara, two weeks later, we are in search of a camp spot with

a view of the Himalayas. So far we've been teased by only glimpses of the peaks. Cresting a lush grassy rise, we pull up short of the steep edge and set up camp. A lone ancient oak tree makes for an intriguing silhouette against the cloudless royal blue sky. This evening Lisa is cooking for four. Upon visiting Nepal years earlier, Lisa's parents unofficially adopted a young boy. Sanu was now a recently married young man. As we sit to eat, Sanu's wife, Kamala, leans forward. With a gentle prayer, she marks our foreheads with bright orange, gummy tika and places garlands of delicate flowers around our necks. Lisa and I are deeply moved by this traditional gesture. We listen to Sanu's life tale (in his well-practiced English) late into the night.

The Jagged Peaks of the Annapurna Himalayas

Lisa awakes me from a deep sleep. She is outside yelling, "It's clear. It's clear!" I scramble to pull up my trousers and throw on a T-shirt before dashing to Lisa's side. Our patience has been rewarded. As if finally appearing from behind a curtain, there stand the glorious Annapurna Peaks of the Himalayas piercing a crystal blue sky. To the west we see Dhaulagiri (26,794 feet), directly in front of us is the perfect pyramid that is Machhapuchhre (22,956 feet), and to the east is the rounded peak of Annapurna II (26,040 feet). We are transfixed. This first sighting and its impact upon us is humbling.

We cannot utter a word. Words are superfluous and descriptions fall short. After being mesmerized for a full 30 minutes,



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we shake ourselves free of the Annapurna spell and grab our cameras.

Caught in a Country-wide Shut-down

We have been stranded back here at the Sacred Valley Guesthouse in Pokhara for three weeks due to a country-wide strike imposed by the Maoist party. Roaming gangs of baton wielding, red T-shirted Maoist's convinced the majority of the population to heed the call to strike. Intimidation is a powerful motivator. All travel is banned, and all businesses were ordered to close. Electricity is rationed to a few hours per day. The mood has shifted,

and the country has come to a sudden halt. Pokhara has become a ghost town. We are not alone as we've been joined by our friend Andy from the UK (riding his F 650 GS). The three of us will ride to Kathmandu as soon as it's safe to do so.

Making a Dash to Kathmandu

Last night on TV, it was announced that the strike was officially over. At 5 a.m., Lisa, Andy, and I pull out of the guesthouse on to the dark street of Pokhara's suburbs en-route to Kathmandu. A low mist clings to the ground, and the air is cool as we pass under an oriental archway that marks the town's limits. We'd been advised to give ourselves a minimum of five hours to reach Nepal's capital and forced to promise Vishnu that we would only attempt the journey in daylight. With the route notorious for roadblocks, landslides, and accidents we've given ourselves slightly longer. On a clear and open bend we pass an over-turned bus and its unfazed passengers milling along the roadside. Ten miles farther, a large roadside sign proclaims the region as an "open defecation-free zone." We cruise the flanks of towering mountains hosting perched settlements. Dozens of small villages dot the long valleys north and south of the road.

Pulling on the brakes we ease up behind a brightly painted truck. We await our turn to negotiate a fast and over-flowing deep stream caused by heavy rainfall. Watching the truck first, we stand on the pegs and

cross through the shallowest route. A submerged trench threatens to have each of us off, but we avoid a swim.

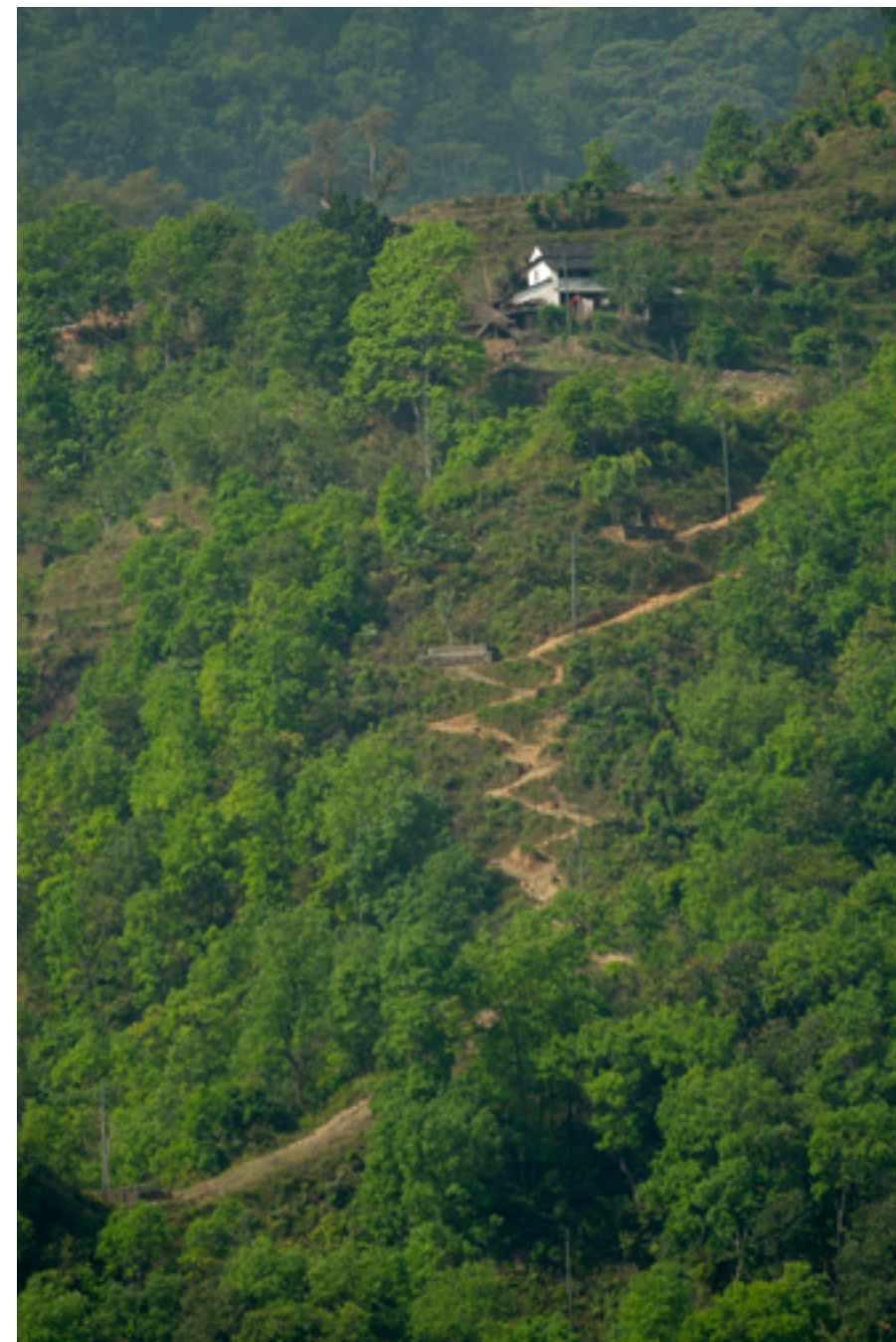
Sixty miles outside the capital, we maneuver through a local road-block where drivers are requested to pay a "donation" to assist the family of a local man who was killed on that same stretch just yesterday. Riot police in dark military kit with shields and face masks patrol the streets of another small town.

Plunging Roads and Kamikaze Drivers

By late afternoon we are climbing continuously; we've lost our bid to enter Kathmandu before rush-hour. Ahead of us, an agonizingly slow bus groans as it drags itself upward. Stalled, over-heated and broken-down trucks litter the road, causing plenty of tailbacks and creating obvious chicane fun for the remaining kamikaze drivers. We're horrified as drivers take blind, single-lane bends at speed, relying on nothing more than telepathic skills. Bus drivers brake and swerve while their assistants lean out the doors gesticulating. Although these guys know every bend and pothole, it doesn't prevent the occasional tragedy of someone sailing over the edge and disappearing into the chasm below. Finally, we see our two-hour delay is caused by a landslide that has washed away part of the road. As the only main route entering Kathmandu from the west, the result is bedlam. We each take our turn hugging the cliff to stay as far away from the loose and crumbling road as possible.

Nestled in the Kathmandu basin is the legendary capital of this ancient land, festooned with temples and stupas. On a hilltop to our left, more brightly colored prayer flags wave in the wind. In the Thamel district, we dodge tourists and squeeze down tight alleyways to our pre-booked guesthouse. Tomorrow, Eagle Eye shipping will arrange our transport to Thailand's capital, Bangkok. The Far East beckons. **RR**

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Facts & Information

Total Mileage
Approximately 545 miles

In General

Landlocked between Tibet and India, Nepal contains eight of the world's ten highest peaks, including Mount Everest, and is among the poorest and least developed countries in the world. The language is Nepalese, but English is spoken in tourist areas. Primary religions include Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.

The Nepalese rupee (Rs) is divided into 100 paisa (p). Currently, \$1 is approximately 89 NPR. Changing large notes (Rs 1000) is difficult, so keep a stash of small denominations. Rickshaw and taxi drivers never have change! ATMS are found in Pokhara and Kathmandu; some accept only local cards. Rely on the U.S. dollar, euro or pounds sterling, which are easy to exchange.

Respectful clothing covers shoulders and thighs. Use the traditional Hindu greeting of 'namaste.' Do not allow "holy men" to plant a tika (blessing) on your forehead unless you are prepared to pay significantly for it.

October to March is the best time to visit. Mid-June to September is monsoon season. April through mid-June is dry and hot. The Himalayas experience snowfall December to February.

How to Get There

Although flights to Kathmandu are limited, those traveling from the U.S. East Coast can make a connection in New Delhi, India. The required visa can be obtained at the airport there or at most border crossings, including Sunauli (near Bhairahawa), which is the most popular entry point into Nepal from India. Keep in mind that an international carnet is required for your own vehicle.

Food & Lodging

Daal bhaat (spiced lentils over boiled rice) is the daily staple, served with tarkari (a spicy mixture of vegetables). Meals are eaten with the right hand. Meat is a luxury. Mexican, Thai, Chinese, and pizza are



Always consult more-detailed maps for touring purposes.

available in Kathmandu and Pokhara. Local dishes are best for those on a budget. Use filtered or bottled water.

In Pokhara and Kathmandu, guest houses suit all budgets (\$8 up). Check for discounts on extended stays.

Roads & Biking

Traffic is somewhat chaotic, but not aggressive. Speeds are low. Road conditions can be poor, and landslides abound during rainy season.

Be flexible, and don't travel during bandhs (strikes) or blockades. They can last many weeks!

Contact Information

- Up-to-date information on visa requirements and travel advice:
www.travel.state.gov/travel

- General travel information
www.welcomenepal.com

Books & Maps

- Nepal (Country Guide)* by Trent Holden, Lonely Planet, ISBN 978-1741797237, \$27.99
- Nepal Nelles Map, ISBN 978-3865742513, \$8.99

Motorcycle & Gear

1999 BMW R 1150 GSA
2002 BMW F 650 GS

Luggage Systems: Touratech Zega
Jacket and Pants: BMW Trailguard
Helmets: BMW System 5
Boots: MX boots
-Alpine Star Tech 6
and Gaerne SG10



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