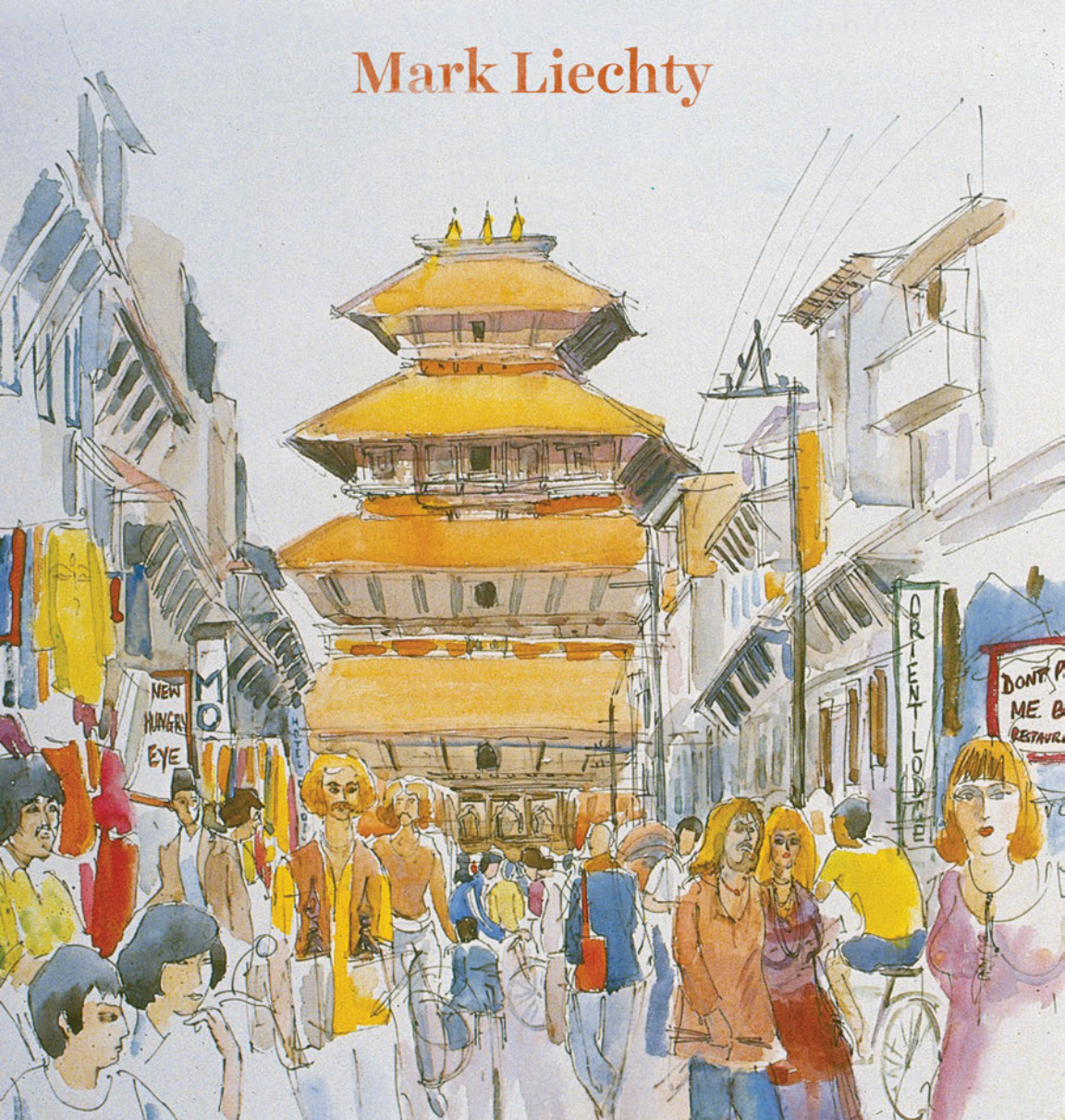


Far Out

*Countercultural Seekers and
the Tourist Encounter in Nepal*

Mark Liechty



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For Laura and Naomi

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Preface

On a late winter evening in 1935, a small boy curled up on a chair in his family's farm home in rural Ohio, paging through the latest copy of *National Geographic*, the only magazine his cash-strapped family subscribed to in the depths of the Great Depression. Encountering an illustrated article entitled "Nepal: The Sequestered Kingdom," he thought to himself, "If only I could go there someday." Almost thirty-five years later, in 1969, my father made that dream come true. With his wife and four kids (including me) he reached Kathmandu, one of the last mystical outposts of the Western imagination.

Generations of exoticizing media representations had fed an intense desire for the Himalayas, a region that geography and politics had conspired to preserve (for the West) as one of the last areas of terra incognita and, as such, one of the last earthly receptacles for Western hopes and dreams. Especially during periods of existential crisis—following the US Civil War, the years between the two World Wars, and again during the 1950s and 1960s—the West looked to the Himalayas with an almost desperate longing for some ancient wisdom that could redeem it. Home of the Theosophists' imagined "Masters of the Universe," the magical kingdom of James Hilton's "Shangri-La," and the levitating monks of Tibetan Buddhism, the Himalayas were "the last home of mystery." For North Americans at least, the Himalayas are as far away as you can get and therefore, seemingly, the least contaminated by Western modernity. By the 1960s, with Tibet closed following the Chinese invasion, the mantle of Himalayan exoticism fell onto Nepal. For many—from the true "seekers"

to the merely curious—Kathmandu was the end of the road, as “far out” as it was far away.

What fascinated me the most about my first visit to Kathmandu was not so much what I had noticed as what I had missed. What I hadn’t understood as a child was that by 1969 Kathmandu had become “the Mecca of hippiedom,” “the Amsterdam of the East,” and “the capital of the Aquarian Age.” Wandering around the valley in 1969, I was probably often within a stone’s throw of some of the leading figures in Western pop and counter-culture. Cat Stevens wrote some of his top hits while sitting in a tea shop in the old city in 1969. Michael Hollingshead—the man who turned Timothy Leary on to LSD, thereby precipitating the Harvard University LSD experiments in the early 1960s—was holding court in a house near Swayambhu. Zina Rachevsky—a Russian “princess,” Hollywood starlet, and in 1968 one of the first Western women to be ordained as a nun in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition—was busy setting up the Kopan Monastery (which would help launch Tibetan Buddhism’s spread to the West). A few years earlier the famous Beat Generation poet Gary Snyder had visited Kathmandu, and, just one year before I visited, Richard Alpert, Timothy Leary’s right-hand man at Harvard, found spiritual awakening in a Kathmandu noodle shop, converted to Hinduism, became Baba Ram Dass, and soon authored *Be Here Now*, a huge bestseller in the 1970s and one of the defining books of the hippie era.

Through the 1970s the Kathmandu hippie scene kept the countercultural dream alive even as it faded away in the West. But by then the country’s exotic appeal had been recast. With Nepali authorities now seeking to wrest control of tourism from the vagaries of the Western imagination, Nepal was reconstituted as an adventure destination where Western consumers could enjoy trekking and cultural tourism.

Far Out tells the story of how generations of counterculturally inclined Westerners have imagined Nepal as a land untainted by modernity and its capital, Kathmandu, a veritable synonym of “Oriental mystique.” What are the forms *and* consequences of these shifting countercultural projections since Nepal, and Kathmandu in particular, has become a tourist destination? Over the generations, how has Nepal figured in the Western imagination? How have these *imagined* Nepals changed through time and how have each touristic generation’s dreams shaped the kinds of tourism that emerged? Conversely, how did Nepalis respond to their “discovery” by throngs of foreigners? And how did foreigners and Nepalis alike make sense of some of the most bizarre characters and (counter)cultural trends that the twentieth century had produced?

With each generation, the West’s shifting countercultural malaise

reimagined what it had lost, projected that longing onto the Himalayas, and impelled its most determined fringe to Nepal in search of itself. From Kipling-esque fantasies, to antiestablishment freedoms, to spiritual enlightenment, to “adventure,” most tourists have found what they were looking for mainly because Nepalis quickly learned to sell the dreams that foreigners arrive and depart with, thinking they found them in Nepal. What tourists think of as a quest is for Nepalis an industry; foreigners are a resource from which to build a modern Nepal. *Far Out* documents the fortuitous convergence between the deep-seated Western longing for an imagined “otherness” located in the remote Himalayas and the Nepali desires to tap into global modernity.

Following the introduction, which explores how Nepal and the Himalayas were exoticized in the Western imagination during the century prior to 1950, this book traces Nepal’s tourism transformations through three distinct phases.

In the first phase (1950 to 1965) postwar prosperity spurred the massive growth of a consumerist middle-class tourist population just as a change of governments in Kathmandu (in 1951) opened Nepal’s doors to foreigners for the first time in a century. Throughout this period, Kathmandu appeared in the Western media through Himalayan mountaineering, “abominable snowman” hunts, and exotic royal coronations that were lavishly portrayed in US magazines and newspapers. Kathmandu became a trophy destination for jet-setting elites raised on colonial representations of the Indian subcontinent: extravagant maharajas, sumptuous palaces, romantic jungles, and tiger hunting. At a time when newly independent India had no interest in perpetuating colonial fantasies, Nepal seemed to preserve the mythical lifestyles of the British Raj.

By the early 1960s Western youth had found Kathmandu and the city soon became a premier destination on the overland youth tourism circuit from Europe to Asia. This second period of Nepal tourism (1965 to 1975) saw American and European youth taking advantage of middle-class disposable incomes, strong Western currencies, and lower airfares—and setting out in massive numbers on journeys to the East. Enterprising Nepalis quickly responded, opening up budget restaurants, lodges, dance clubs, and hashish shops in an area that came to be known as Freak Street.

The third phase, from the mid-1970s onward, saw the de-radicalization of global popular culture and a corresponding transformation of world tourism. Succumbing to international pressure to delegalize cannabis, and now embarrassed by its reputation as a hippie mecca, Nepal began to discourage low-budget tourism and rebrand itself as an adventure destination. In Kathmandu a whole new tourist district (Thamel) sprang up to

service the adventure tourists, people who wished to distance themselves physically and morally from the 1960s ethos of Freak Street. By around 1980—the point where this study draws to a close—the main patterns of Nepal’s current tourism economy were established. Kathmandu had situated itself as the gateway to a variety of adventure opportunities ranging from low-budget trekking to high-priced Everest summit trips, from white-water rafting to elephant-back jungle tours, from cut-rate meditation courses to budget-busting “enlightenment travel.”

Even while insisting on the power of mediated imaginations to impel tourists to places like Nepal, my goal throughout this book is *not* to portray tourism as something that *happened to* Nepal but as an *encounter*—cultural and economic—between people who share a complex, historically constituted world stage. While Nepalis and tourists alike are empowered in different ways within this shared global context, both groups used the encounter to pursue their own interests. My aim is to document both tourist constructions of Nepal *and* Nepali constructions of tourism—how Nepalis *experienced* foreigners, how they coped with and profited from tourists, and how they actively managed Nepal’s tourism brand. In this encounter both sides played roles in the drama of twentieth-century global modernity, with Nepalis actively shaping their place in the modern world even as Westerners came to Nepal seeking to escape it.

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I owe a deep debt of gratitude to many, many people including the approximately seventy-five that my research coworkers and I interviewed, almost all of whom are quoted anonymously in this book. To protect their privacy I will not name names but I do want to make clear my sincere thanks to each for sharing their memories with us. Their voices bring this book to life.

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PART ONE

The Golden Age

Building the Road to Kathmandu: Steps in the West's Journey to the East

Inherent in the strange and remote is a powerful interest . . . the attractiveness of which is in inverse proportion to its familiarity. G. W. F. HEGEL

The story of tourism in Nepal begins long before the first tourists set foot in the country. Global geopolitics and the Western geo-imaginary had contrived to place a heavy burden of countercultural longing onto the Himalayan region such that, when Nepal finally opened its doors in the early 1950s, at least a century's worth of pent up desire could finally be satisfied through tourism. To understand why Kathmandu became one of the most fabled world travel destinations—and not Karachi, Kilwa, Krakow, or any of countless other places in the world that are no less intrinsically alluring—requires a look into the seemingly haphazard developments that combined to elevate Nepal in the Western imagination and then suddenly make it accessible at the dawn of the era of global mass tourism.

The West's fascination with the Himalayas has earlier roots but reached unprecedented intensity during the second half of the nineteenth century. In the social and spiritual upheaval sometimes referred to as the Third Great Awakening, a range of popular movements grappled with the growing rifts between religion, science, and capitalism and the implications these antagonisms had for Western civilization.

Along with a host of new religious movements (Christian Science, Spiritualism, Pentecostalism, etc.) came broad criticism of Western society (Marxism, Romanticism, etc.), and it was the peculiar alignment of these moral and social critiques that brought the Himalayas into the Western mind's eye.

Mountaineers and Mystics

Part of the appeal of the Himalayas stemmed from the nineteenth-century Romantic reevaluation of mountain landscapes (Hansen 2013). Once dreaded as the epitome of empty, barren loneliness, in the context of growing disenchantment with Western modernity mountains came to symbolize spaces of retreat for people in search of solitude and an idealized preindustrial humanity (Schell 2000: 149–51). From mountain tourism and mountaineering to mountain resorts, sanatoria, and “hill stations” in colonial India, mountains became exhilarating and grand places to escape the evils of modern civilization. As the world's highest mountains, the Himalayas were second to none in inspiring romantic attraction, serving as a magnet for the disaffected of all sorts.

But mountains were about more than escape and wholesome adventure: increasingly their inaccessibility stood for their purity not only environmentally but also morally and spiritually. It is in this context that the West's countercultural fringes projected their dreams onto the Himalayas, conflating their personal experiences of marginality with the geographic and geopolitical marginality of High Asia, turning the world's most isolated region into a “geographical emblem of anti-structure” (Yi-fu Tuan in Bishop 1989: 7).

Himalayan tourism began as “seekers” sought to flee their own cultural alienation. Some, such as explorers and mountaineers, looked to escape the stifling confines of the West. Others were drawn by the mystical appeal of Tibetan Buddhism. But for both groups travel to (and affiliation with) the non-West was a quasi-political act deeply rooted in nostalgic longing to reclaim what they imagined had been lost in the West. From the start, we find the recurring theme of Westerners being drawn to the Himalayan periphery less to find the people who resided there than to find the selves they wished to be—or imagined to have lost.

It's easy to imagine that those drawn to the Himalayas for mountaineering and those in search of spiritual fulfilment were two distinct groups. Yet from the outset many people had a foot in each camp. Mountaineers

often had mystical compulsions and spiritual seekers were de facto explorers. Almost all of them were countercultural strivers who looked to the Himalayas as the last “untouched” place on earth. As Peter Bishop notes, by the early twentieth century, “Tibet symbolized everything the West imagined it had itself lost”: “Tibet was not just *any* place, not just *one* among many within the Western global imagination. For a few years at the turn of the century it became *the* place” (Bishop 1989: 204, 143).

Theosophy

Theosophy is one of the primary reasons why the Himalayas became “*the* place” of Western countercultural projection in the early twentieth century. In its day Theosophy was a major spiritual movement with forty-five thousand official members, five hundred branches in over forty countries, and an impact on Western popular culture that exceeded any of these numbers (Pedersen 2001: 157). Followers included the likes of Arthur Conan Doyle, William James, Thomas Edison, Carl Jung, Hermann Hesse, Mohandas (“Mahatma”) Gandhi, and Albert Einstein. William Butler Yeats called Theosophy’s founder—Madam Helena Petrovna Blavatsky—“the most living person alive” and embraced the movement as part of his “revolt of the soul against the intellect” (Schell 2000: 228).

This anti-intellectual, antiestablishment sentiment is key to understanding Theosophy’s appeal. The Victorian era witnessed great scientific discovery and secularization, as well as profound alienation. With many people losing faith in science (and its seemingly unethical materialism) *and* in Christianity’s ability to preserve the sacred experience, Theosophy offered a radical alternative. Claiming to unite science and religion into a “higher science,” Theosophy offered its adherents “true knowledge” that drew from ancient mystical wisdom (Pedersen 2001: 152). Madam Blavatsky rejected truths based in Western science or Christianity and instead sought out occult knowledge, taking scientific rejection as sure evidence of a deeper, more profound, subversive truth (Meade 1980: 72). Myths and their “secret meanings” contained underlying truth, shielded from profane eyes but revealed to her by her psychic powers.

The Spiritualism craze that swept the United States following the Civil War provided fertile countercultural ground for the seeds of Theosophy. At a time when science was exploring the seemingly mystical, invisible forces of electricity, magnetism, and gases, the boundaries between science and the occult seemed particularly porous. Spiritualism promised to link the

material and spirit worlds: it was in the context of widespread interest in séances, mesmerism, and assorted psychic phenomena that Madam Blavatsky found a receptive audience. In the 1870s she moved to the United States where she met Henry Steel Olcott, a journalist who had written extensively on the Spiritualist movement. Together Blavatsky and Olcott founded the Theosophical Society in New York City in 1875.

Madam Blavatsky's first book, *Isis Unveiled* (1877), established the (imagined) link between Egyptian and Tibetan religion unique to Theosophy. Both were led by "Adepts"—the "Brotherhood of Luxor" and the "Tibetan Brotherhood"—whom Blavatsky claimed to be in regular psychic contact. In 1879 Blavatsky and Olcott traveled to India where they declared themselves Buddhists. Frustrated in their efforts to bring Indian religious leaders into Theosophy (Pedersen 2001: 153), Blavatsky and Olcott forged alliances with more obliging Tibetan "astral" (disembodied) spirits.

The gradual shift in Blavatsky's spiritual geography—from Egypt to India to Tibet—paralleled her own shift toward ever-more arcane spiritual assertions. Blavatsky claimed to be in regular paranormal communication with the "Tibetan Mahatmas" (or Great Souls) who resided as astral beings in Tibet (Schell 2000: 225). Communication with the Tibetan spirits was crucial for Blavatsky not only because it provided esoteric wisdom but because it justified her spiritual leadership (Pedersen 2001: 156). As Blavatsky's claims became more and more convoluted, by necessity they became more unverifiable, incontestable, and—literally—far-fetched. With Tibet essentially the globe's last remaining terra incognita, it became the best place from which Theosophy could claim spiritual inspiration and legitimacy.

Even if Theosophy is, in the words of anthropologist Agehananda Bharati, "a melee of horrendous hogwash and . . . inane esoterica" (in Lopez 2001: 193), the fact is that Blavatsky and Theosophy are largely responsible for focusing the West's popular longing for meaning onto Tibet and the Himalayan region.

Before her death in 1891, Madam Blavatsky was "arguably, the most influential woman in Europe and America" (Pedersen 2001: 157). Author of a half dozen best-selling books and leader of a worldwide countercultural movement, Blavatsky had phenomenal charismatic appeal that apparently lent credence to her bizarre mystical writings. But Blavatsky's growing fame also presented her with significant problems. As eager biographers demanded a back story, Blavatsky had to construct her own hagiography—which she provided in contradictory and inconsistent

ways to various people.¹ Blavatsky's efforts to weave the Himalayas into her life story offer insights into the power of Tibet—and even Nepal—in the late nineteenth-century Western imagination.

Born in 1831 to an aristocratic German-Russian family in the Ukraine, Helena Petrovna (van Hahn) Blavatsky had a remarkable life even without the tall tales she appended to it. At seventeen she entered a short, disastrous marriage with a much older man (Mr. Blavatsky) whom she left after only a few months. Sent off to spend time with relatives, she gave her chaperones the slip and traveled on her own down the Mediterranean coast. By 1850 she was in Cairo where she discovered Egypt's "occult mysteries" and the liberating, vision-inspiring delights of hashish. According to a biographer, "Helena had a recurrent need to get out of her body," and hashish had the desired effect. Blavatsky described hashish as a "wonderful drug" that allowed her to go "anywhere or wherever I wish" (Meade 1980: 65). That these dream voyages were, for her, "as real as if they were ordinary events of actual life" (*ibid.*) goes a long way toward accounting for Blavatsky's later world travels—legendary in every sense of the word—and for Theosophy itself.

By the summer of 1851 Blavatsky had traveled to London where, depressed and suicidal, she stood on the Waterloo Bridge, pondering the water below "with a strong desire to die" (Meade 1980: 68). It was shortly thereafter that she first met her spiritual master, the man/spirit she called Master Morya, Mahatma M., or The Sahib. On August 12, 1851, Blavatsky claims to have met a group of magnificently dressed Nepali princes, one of whom—a tall, turbaned nobleman—she recognized immediately as the embodiment of an "astral spirit" whom she had encountered frequently since her childhood. The Master directed her to meet him in Hyde Park where he commanded her to launch the Theosophical Society (Barborka 1966: 17–22). In 1851 the only South Asian princes ever to have visited London were Jung Bahadur Rana of Nepal and his entourage. Having recently claimed power in a bloody coup in Kathmandu (Stiller 1981) and seeking to obtain a British blessing, Jung Bahadur became the first South Asian elite to visit the seat of British imperial power (Whelpton 1983). The problem with Madam Blavatsky's story is that Jung Bahadur and his retinue had left Britain on August 20, 1850, a year before she claims to have seen him.

Though Blavatsky never met Jung Bahadur, it is certain that images and memories of his London visit—*the* social event of the previous year and

1. Even sympathetic researchers acknowledged that trying to reconcile Madam's memories with historical fact was "most embarrassing for the biographer!" (Barborka 1966: 23).

exhaustively covered in the British press (Whelpton 1983)—were still fresh and circulating. Mysterious Jung Bahadur Rana and exotic Nepal took root in Blavatsky's fertile imagination, nurtured by emotional crisis and perhaps hashish, eventually growing into the massive Theosophical movement which for the next century formed one of the principle structures of Western countercultural projection and fantasy of the East in general, and the Himalayas in particular. Exactly a century would pass between Madam Blavatsky's mythical encounter with a Nepali prince in 1851 and Nepal's official opening to the world in 1951 (when the last of Jung Bahadur Rana's descendants was finally overthrown).

One of the instructions that Blavatsky claims to have received from her mystical Nepali Master was to travel to Tibet in preparation for founding the Theosophical Society (Barborka 1966:18). Blavatsky claimed to have lived in Tibet and traveled around the world twice during a seven-year period in the 1850s. Now understood to be total fabrication, these years of "travel" set the tone for much of Theosophical "knowledge." That Blavatsky knew little about Tibet is because there was, as yet, very little Western literature on the topic: much of what she claimed about Tibetan Buddhism was actually drawn from more accessible Hindu sources (Korom 2001: 171; Kyabgon 2001: 384).

Yet Theosophy's treatment of Tibet is ultimately less important for its (in)accuracy than for its overall *positive* portrayal of Tibetan Buddhism. In good countercultural fashion, Theosophy celebrated Tibetan religion in direct opposition to Western theological and academic perspectives that actively reviled them. For centuries Protestant Christianity had condemned Tibetan Buddhism by comparing it with Catholicism: both were full of idolatry, saint worship, ostentatious rituals, and corrupt institutions, and were generally priest-ridden and Popish (Lopez 1998:29). Nineteenth-century academics condemned Tibetan Buddhism in similar terms. As scholars learned more about ancient or "true Buddhism," most *contemporary* forms of Buddhism, especially Tibetan, were deemed hopelessly degenerate and far from their ancient glory—like Catholicism (Lopez 1998: 32, 168). Early twentieth-century Western Buddhology abandoned its anti-Catholic rhetoric but retained a distinctly negative view of Tibetan Buddhism at a time when Theosophy kept alive images of Tibet and Tibetan religion as antidotes to Western civilization. Because Theosophy prompted generations of seekers to turn their minds—and, increasingly, their feet—toward the Himalayas, we need to trace the influence of Theosophy through the twentieth century as a persistent romanticization

of the Himalayan region continued to keep Tibet and Nepal in the countercultural mind's eye.

Mystical Travelers

Late nineteenth-century movements like Spiritualism and Theosophy reflected a larger spiritual crisis triggered by ascendant science and increasingly discredited mainstream religion. But these antiestablishment currents only broadened in the early twentieth century when, during the turmoil of World War I, Western countercultures increasingly turned against the modernist faith in progress to mount a general critique of industrial society. For many the war shattered what remaining faith they had in Western civilization, leaving a desperate longing for someplace on earth still untouched.

While the West's imagination turned toward Tibet, in fact very few people had the resources and stamina to actually travel in the Himalayas. Prior to 1950 it's estimated that fewer than about 1,250 Westerners ever made it to Lhasa, the Tibetan capital (Bishop 1989: 245). Tibet had been under Chinese control to greater and lesser degrees over the previous centuries, but with the Qing Dynasty collapsing from domestic rebellion and foreign intervention, Tibet enjoyed de facto independence. Though neither Chinese nor Tibetan authorities welcomed Westerners, a number of them managed to "penetrate" the Forbidden Land (Bishop 1989: 195), entering either through British-held Ladakh west of Nepal or the Sikkim/Darjeeling area east of Nepal.

As for Nepal, with few exceptions, the country remained off-limits to Western visitors. Inaugurated by Jung Bahadur, the era of Rana family rule (1846–1951) was characterized by a peculiar mixture of sycophantic Anglophilia and intense xenophobia (Liechty 1997). While the Ranas imported vast amounts of foreign luxury *goods* and enjoyed lifestyles in close approximation to Western elites, foreign *people* were another matter. Aside from the British Resident and his entourage in Kathmandu, no one visited Nepal without a personal invitation from the Rana prime minister. Before 1951 only about three hundred Westerners had made it to Kathmandu, far fewer than had managed to get to the more remote Tibetan capital.

One of the most fascinating Western visitors to Tibet was Francis Younghusband (1863–1942), leader of the infamous British military invasion of Tibet. On the pretext that Russia had military interests in the Tibetan capital, but motivated also by Lhasa's romantic mystique, in 1904 the Brit-

ish mounted a large-scale military incursion from British-held Darjeeling.² With four British newspaper reporters trailing telegraph wire behind them, the invasion became perhaps the first war to be reported “live” (Schell 2000: 192). The British quickly overcame Tibetan resistance (armed with antique muskets and leather cannons) leaving over one thousand dead, while fewer than ten British troops died. Although Younghusband found no trace of the rumored Russians, he nevertheless forced the Tibetans to sign a treaty requiring them to open the country to British trade, promise not to consort with foreigners, accept a resident British representative, and pay war indemnities.

Having—in the words of Lord Curzon, British Viceroy of India—“destroyed the virginity of the bride to whom [we] aspired,” and perhaps needing to justify their violent deflowering, expedition accounts of Tibet soon turned from eager wonder to smug condemnation. Excitement at having penetrated the “hidden kingdom” gave way to descriptions of a filthy city, an inhumane theocratic system of governance, and condemnation of “Lamaism” which was now discovered to be a religion of “sloth and decadence.” Trotting out language usually reserved for Indian Hindus (and Roman Catholics), Younghusband called Tibetans “the most priest-ridden people in the world . . . sapped of their vigor and spirit.” Yet not even these negative portrayals could turn the tide of popular mythologizing for long: “The mystique of Lhasa continued to grow virtually unabated as the small drama of 1904 faded from memory” (Schell 2000: 201–2).

Francis Younghusband was, in fact, one of the main architects of this re-mystification. Born and raised in a colonial Indian hill station and trained at Sandhurst Military Academy, by 1904 Younghusband was already famous as the youngest-ever member of the Royal Geographical Society. In 1887 he became the first European to travel from Beijing to Kashmir via the Karakoram Mountains. Yet, like so many others of his time, Younghusband was also mystically inclined. Well-versed in Theosophy, Younghusband was disappointed that the Lamas in Lhasa had never heard of Blavatsky’s Mahatmas. But in his 1910 memoir of the invasion, Younghusband reported having had a spiritual awakening upon his departure from Lhasa.

I now looked toward that mysterious purply haze in which the sacred city was once more wrapped. . . . From it came only the echo of the Lama’s words of peace. . . . I was insensibly suffused with an almost intoxicating sense of elation and good will . . . till it

2. Younghusband’s force included four thousand yaks, seven thousand mules, two hundred ponies, six camels, over ten thousand porters, and 1,150 troops armed with light artillery and four of the deadly new Maxim guns—the first generation of rapid-fire automatic weapons.

thrilled through me with overpowering intensity. Never again could I think of evil, or ever again be at enmity with any man. All nature and all humanity were bathed in a rosy glowing radiancy; and life for the future seemed nought [sic] but buoyancy and light. (Younghusband 1910: 326)

In his last decades Younghusband went on to write on increasingly eccentric topics ranging from free love and pantheism to telepathy and alien life (Schell 2000: 203). As such, Younghusband foreshadowed so many later Himalayan travelers: drawn by romantic longing, disillusioned by its reality, but ultimately able to claim his own fantasies as a deeper revelation of truth.

Following Younghusband came a succession of Western religious seekers who, steeped in Theosophy and longing for communion with spiritual masters, also made the difficult journey to the Himalayas. Among the earliest and most important was Alexandra David-Neel (1868–1969), a French spiritualist and student of Buddhism who managed to spend many years in Tibet. A lifelong member of the Theosophical Society, she traveled to India to study Sanskrit and Buddhism in 1911.³ With encouragement from the thirteenth Dalai Lama, David-Neel spent fourteen years studying Tibetan language and Buddhism with masters in Sikkim and Tibet. In 1927, traveling in disguise, she became the first Western woman to enter Lhasa before returning to France where she began writing the twenty-eight books for which she became famous (Schell 2000: 236).

Scholars have long had difficulty evaluating David-Neel's contributions. Like other Theosophists, she was fascinated with the occult and paranormal phenomena, delighting her eager readers with stories of levitating monks, astral projection, oracles, and amazing feats accomplished by meditating adepts. With titles like *With Mystics and Magicians in Tibet* (1929) it's no wonder that her books were widely read and frequently translated. But, along with the hokum, many of David-Neel's works contain valuable empirical accounts of Tibetan life and thought derived from her unprecedented experience among Tibetans. Today scholars have "vindicated and rehabilitated" some of David-Neel's corpus (Lopez 2001: 183) but her works that remain in print—and in Kathmandu bookstores—are, predictably, the ones that play to Westerner's longing for mystification.

Alongside David-Neel's less credible books in Kathmandu shops are works by Lama Govinda, a.k.a. Ernst Lothar Hoffmann (1895–1985). A

3. A Nepal government list of foreign arrivals for 1912 records a visit by "Madame Alexandra David Neel, a French lady (November), for study of Buddhist philosophy" (in Landon 1993 [1928], 2:303).

German, Hoffmann became interested in Buddhism as a young man and in the 1920s traveled to Sri Lanka to study with a German-born Theravadan monk. Taking a Buddhist name and dressed in monk's robes, he toured the subcontinent eventually making his way to Darjeeling and the Tibetan Buddhist monastery at Ghoom. In his popular autobiography *The Way of the White Clouds* (1966), Lama Govinda claimed that at Ghoom he experienced a transformation and was initiated into the Gelukpa sect, along with additional esoteric initiations. How a person who neither read nor spoke Tibetan could have undergone the intensive training needed for these initiations has long puzzled scholars. Lama Govinda provides some insight into this conundrum in his *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism* (1969) where he explains that some people may be "initiated" if "in virtue of their own sensitiveness, [they] respond to the subtle vibrations of symbols which are presented to them either by tradition or intuition" (Govinda 1969: 25). Apparently it was Lama Govinda's sensitivity to the subtle vibrations of his own intuition that allowed him to become an expert on Tibetan Buddhism and a guru figure for many in the 1960s counterculture movement. One of the leading scholars of Tibetan Buddhism, Donald Lopez, concludes that both Alexandra David-Neel and Lama Govinda "embellish[ed] the realities of Tibet with their own mystical fancies, and . . . mystified their readers, playing on the credulity of the reading public" (2001: 184).

A third influential early twentieth-century Western religious traveler to the Himalayas was Walter Y. Evans-Wentz (1878–1965). From New Jersey, Evans-Wentz pursued early interests in spiritualism and joined the Theosophical Society in 1901. With degrees from Stanford and Oxford he headed for South Asia following World War I where he studied with several prominent Hindu gurus before traveling to the Himalayas. In Sikkim he teamed up with Kazi Dawa-Samdub (an English-speaking Tibetan school teacher in Gangtok) who translated a series of Tibetan Buddhist texts which Evans-Wentz then "edited" and published. By far the most influential of these was a translation of the *Bardo Thodol*⁴ (or *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*) that Oxford University Press published in 1927 at a time of intense popular and scientific interest in reincarnation (Bishop 1989: 48). Evans-Wentz's book found a highly receptive audience, became an instant classic, and is today "the most widely read 'Tibetan text' in the West"

4. *Bardo Thodol* is a Nyingma mortuary text, an extensively annotated copy of which Evans-Wentz bought from a British army officer following the 1904 invasion (Lopez 1998: 49). It describes the cycle of death and rebirth as a journey through three intermediary stages, or *bardos*. Enlightened individuals recognize this intermediary consciousness as reality and are thus liberated from rebirth. The rest proceed to the last *bardo* and another incarnation.

(Lopez 1998: 48). In the book's preface Evans-Wentz repeats the common Theosophical argument that, in time, Western science will (re)discover the truths of Eastern wisdom.

One of the first to take up the challenge of aligning Western science with the *Bardo Thodol's* Eastern wisdom was Carl Jung (1875–1961), the Swiss psychiatrist who believed that the human psyche was innately religious. Jung sought humanity's religious nature in a universal “collective unconscious” that could be found by distilling dreams, myths, religious practices, and symbols from around the world into “archetypes” supposedly shared by all peoples through time. Already deeply influenced by Theosophy (Lopez 1998: 57), Jung immediately latched onto Evans-Wentz's *Book of the Dead* noting in his introduction to the first German edition (1935) that “ever since it was first published, the *Bardo Thodol* has been my constant companion, and to it I owe not only many stimulating ideas and discoveries, but also many fundamental insights” (1958 [1935]: 284).

By far the most lasting and momentous of Jung's “insights” is that “the *Bardo Thodol* is in the highest degree psychological in its outlook,” a work that offered “deep insight into the secrets of the human psyche” (1958 [1935]: 284–85). The details of his analysis are here less important than the simple fact that Jung transformed Tibetan religious thought into psychology. Jung essentialized a whole universe of historically and culturally specific ideas, turning them into grist for his own mill, a project that involved refuting Freud and advancing his own “scientific” psychological theories (Lopez 1998: 59).

Jung's “psychologization” of Tibetan Buddhism also played into deeply felt Western countercultural beliefs that the mystical East promised *treatment* for ills that had befallen Western civilization. If Eastern religion is really psychology, then Eastern religious practices—most notably meditation—can be reimagined as psychotherapy (Pedersen 2001: 160). Jung was the first and most important in a long line of quasi-scientific figures to turn the East into a therapy with results ranging from the modern figure of the guru/Rinpoche-as-therapist, to meditation and yoga as a “self-discovery” or even “fitness” phenomena. Cut loose from their epistemological moorings, Eastern ideas and practices are harnessed to symptoms of an ever-shifting Western spiritual malaise once again transforming “the East” into a screen for Western projections.

What links people like Blavatsky, Younghusband, David-Neel, Lama Govinda, and Jung to many contemporary travelers to the Himalayas is a persistent countercultural disenchantment with modernity coupled with a longing for an “other place” of imaginative escape. All of them looked to

the East as the place to regain the soul (Jung's *anima mundi*) that the West had lost. The concluding lines of Jung's commentary on the *Bardo Thodol* reads: "It is good that such to all intents and purposes 'useless' books exist. They are meant for those 'queer folk' who no longer set much store by the uses, aims, and meaning of present-day 'civilization'" (1958 [1935]: 301). Like so many others before and since, Jung interpreted "the East" (distilled in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*) as "meant for" countercultural folk who have lost faith in Western civilization. The same kind of countercultural critiques drove many of the mountaineers and popular writers that soon followed.

The Himalayas in Popular Culture

With romantic interest in European mountain landscapes on the rise during the nineteenth century, mountaineering grew in popularity as climbing became a metaphorical journey away from the sullied realms of civilization into the purity of the wilderness. It was only a matter of time before the Himalayas—the world's tallest mountains and already planted firmly in the Western imagination as a site of mystical alterity—attracted the attention of serious mountaineers. The decade before World War I saw a rush of expeditions to the Himalayas but climbing was limited to areas under British control (Ortner 1999). Believed to be the world's highest peak (based on long-distance trigonometric surveys), Mt. Everest became the ultimate prize.

Yet, because Mt. Everest was in the unmapped and off-limits borderland between Nepal and Tibet, the mountain proved to be almost as difficult to get to as it was to climb. With Nepal strictly closed to foreigners, the only access to Mt. Everest was from the north, through Tibet. But the Tibetans too prohibited access to the mountain until 1920 when, in the face of Chinese military threats, the thirteenth Dalai Lama finally relented. In exchange for weapons, the British negotiated permission for several Everest expeditions (Hansen 2001: 92) and a promise from the Dalai Lama not to allow other countries access to the region (Peissel 1966: 226).

After a mapping expedition in 1921 and a failed summit attempt in 1922, it was the third British Everest expedition in 1924 that captured the world's attention. Organized by none other than the mystical Francis Younghusband—now Sir Francis, president of the Royal Geographical Society—the 1924 expedition is famous for the mysterious deaths of climbers George Mallory and Andrew Irvine, both last seen only a few

hundred meters below the summit.⁵ In Mallory (who memorably declared that he wished to climb Everest “because it’s there”) the world found a “true hero and martyr” (Macfarlane 2003: 272; Bishop 1989: 201). Already the subject of heavy press coverage, Mallory and Irvine’s deaths only increased popular interest in Everest. Fed by the publication of several best-selling books,⁶ Mallory became the object of almost cult-like devotion, his death seen as “a symbol of human inspiration, of the struggle of the spirit against matter, of idealism over the mundane” (Bishop 1989: 217).

Far less well-known than these early climbing exploits is the fact that these British expeditions also included film crews (Hansen 1999). With Tibetan permission, the 1922 expedition also returned home with a group of monks who toured as “The Dancing Lamas of Everest.” Unfortunately, both films and shows portrayed Tibetans in less than glowing light, contrasting dignified, manly Britons with “squalid but mystical Tibetans” (Hansen 2001: 93). The thirteenth Dalai Lama—who subscribed to the London newspapers—read accounts of the Dancing Lamas and took “the whole affair as a direct affront to the religion of which he is the head,” according to a British official in Lhasa (in Hansen 2001: 94). In fact, the Tibetan government was so upset that it withdrew permission for future British Everest expeditions.

Tibetan anger explains why, even though they had nearly summited in 1924, it was almost a decade before the British made their next attempt on Everest. In the early 1930s Tibetan fears of a Chinese invasion again allowed the British to broker an arms-for-climbing-permission deal and in 1933 and 1936 they made their third and fourth attempts on Mt. Everest. These expeditions attracted unprecedented media coverage not least because the public hoped they would solve the mystery of Mallory and Irvine. Although the expeditions failed in their two main objectives—to summit and find information on the lost heroes of 1924—they did succeed in a related endeavor. Film crews were banned but the Tibetan government allowed British airplanes to fly over and photograph Mt. Everest (Ether-ton 1983 [1934]). Nepal’s prime minister, Maharaja Juddha SJB Rana, also granted consent. While reaping praise as “an enlightened and progressive ruler” (Ether-ton 1983 [1934]: 31), no doubt Juddha was also calculating the favorable cost/benefit ratio that such publicity would bring to Nepal

5. Seventy-five years later climber Conrad Anker found Mallory’s body but whether he summited remains unknown. Intriguingly, a photo of his wife that Mallory had promised to leave at the summit was missing from his otherwise perfectly intact wallet (Anker 1999).

6. E.g., C. G. Bruce’s *The Assault on Mt. Everest* (1924) and E. F. Norton’s 1925 book *The Fight for Everest, 1924*.

without necessitating any foreigners setting foot in the country.⁷ In what was a daring technical accomplishment for its time, the British team flew a squadron of high-powered biplanes around the summit of Everest in 1933, generating “world-wide interest” as well as photos seen around the world (Etherton 1983 [1934]: 3; Fellowes 1934).⁸

While mountaineering exploits intermittently captured public attention throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Himalayas were also regularly featured in a wide range of popular books and movies. Certainly the most famous of these was James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon*. Published in 1933, in the midst of the Great Depression, Hilton’s novel introduced the world to “Shangri-La,” became a huge best-seller, was issued as the world’s first paperback book, was quickly made into a film (1937), and soon spawned a host of derivative novels and films about imagined Himalayan paradises. Though it now seems somewhat campy, in its day *Lost Horizon* was taken as serious literature speaking to deep truths.⁹

In the novel an airplane flying from northwest India is hijacked and flown deep into the Himalayas before crash landing near the entrance to a hidden valley. On the plane are several Europeans, including the hero Hugh Conway, an alienated World War I veteran disillusioned by the violence and crass materialism of Western civilization. An Oxford-trained diplomat who had spent years in Asia, Conway exudes a Buddhist-like nonchalance through “a love of quietness, contemplation, and being alone” (Hilton 1998 [1933]: 45). At the Lamasery of Shangri-La Conway learns from the High Lama that he himself has been chosen to lead the Lamasery following the Lama’s imminent death. Conway and the others eventually leave the valley but the book ends with reports of Conway trying to make his way back.

Most twenty-first century readers are unaware of *Lost Horizon’s* strong resonances with Theosophy. Like Blavatsky’s mythical Tibetan Brotherhood, ensconced in the Himalayas and presiding over the ancient wisdom of the advanced races, Hilton’s Lamasery preserves all the great works

7. A 1933 *Time Magazine* article portrays Juddha less flatteringly as a “wily Mongol” with a “devious mind” who feared that the proposed aerial photography “sounded like preparation for invasion” (*Time* 1933: 28). As the following footnote indicates, Juddha’s fears were completely justified.

8. Although officially billed as a scientific endeavor, the April 1933 Everest flights had much more complicated motives. Funded by the wealthy British fascist Lady Houston, and backed by a rogue’s gallery of ultra-rightwing Britons, the “Houston Mount Everest Expedition” was also intent on using aerial photographs to create survey maps for the British Army (Zander 2010: 326). Furthermore, at a time of feared British racial degeneracy and in the face of anticolonial resistance in India, Lady Houston believed that the expedition would “show India that we are still a virile and active race, and can overcome difficulties with energy and vigour, both for ourselves and for India” (in Zander 2010: 323).

9. *Lost Horizon* received the Hawthornden Prize, a British literary award for fiction.

of (mainly Western) civilization against an impending global calamity.¹⁰ Snug in his magical Himalayan valley, where time is mysteriously slowed, the High Lama (a Catholic priest from Luxembourg) explains: “Here we shall stay with our books and our music and our meditations, conserving the frail elegancies of a dying age, and seeking such wisdom as men will need when their passions are all spent. We have a heritage to cherish and bequeath” (Hilton 1998 [1933]: 191). Written at a time of intense anxiety and pessimism over the future of Western civilization, *Lost Horizon* reveals far more about its author’s cultural context than about the Himalayas (Hutt 1996: 51).

As such, Hilton’s novel captured the imagination of an age. With its bizarre mix of Buddhism and Christianity, its Christian Dalai Lama figure, its Tibet cleansed of all filth and discomfort, Shangri-La was the perfect distillation of centuries of Western fantasies about the Himalayas. In the midst of its problems, the West *needed* a Shangri-La and the only place on earth unknown enough to harbor it was the mystical vastness of the Himalayas. Its name eventually appended to everything from boutiques and porn sites to poodles and US battleships, Shangri-La has to be one of the “key words” of the twentieth century and, arguably, “the most powerful utopian myth of a largely dystopian century” (Schell 2000: 243).

While Hilton’s *Lost Horizon* may be the most enduring early twentieth-century popular cultural treatment of the Himalayas, it was only part of a veritable tidal wave of works featuring travels, real and imagined, in South Asia and the Himalayas. On the nonfiction end of the spectrum were popular travel accounts. With much of Western Asia in European colonial hands following World War I, overland travels between Europe and South Asia became more appealing. Robert Byron’s (1905–1941) famous *The Road to Oxiana* (1937), about a journey through Persia and Afghanistan, is regarded as a classic in travel literature. A young shoestring traveler with a love for the exotic and close ties to local people, some have called Byron the first hippie. In 1939 Swiss explorer Ella Maillart (1903–1997) became the first person, to my knowledge, to drive a car overland from Europe to India. With Maillart already famous for having walked from Peking to

10. Hilton likely based the place Shangri-La on the Tibetan “Shambhala”—the legendary Himalayan paradise inhabited by enlightened immortals. Madam Blavatsky introduced the Shambhala myth to Western popular culture after which it became a recurrent theme in generations of Theosophical writings. The word “Shangri-La” bears close resemblance to *Changri-la* (in Tibetan: Chang-peak-pass) an actual place just west of Mt. Everest. It’s not hard to imagine Hilton poring over maps of the Everest region widely published in books and the popular press and being captivated by what must have seemed like an impossibly out-of-the-way place. (At least two others have noted the similarity between Nepal’s Changri-la and the fictional Shangri-La: Simpson 1976 [1967]: 20 and M. B. Shrestha 2000: 123.)

Kashmir in the early 1930s, her 1947 book *The Cruel Way* documents an overland journey that hundreds of thousands of European and American youth undertook between the mid-1950s and the late 1970s (when the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan shut off the route). By the 1940s the idea of Western youth traveling to Asia (for adventure and enlightenment) had settled into the popular imagination to the extent that Somerset Maugham's youthful American hero in *The Razor's Edge* (1944) could wander off to India, settle down with a guru in an ashram,¹¹ and achieve nirvana.¹²

The early twentieth century saw many other popular culture representations of Asia and the Himalayas. On the heels of Rudyard Kipling's popular novel *Kim* (1898), which featured an endearing Tibetan Lama as one of its main characters, in 1901 Arthur Conan Doyle, a Spiritualist with deep interest in Theosophy, resurrected the great detective Sherlock Holmes. Conan Doyle had killed Holmes almost a decade earlier, but popular demand—and cash-flow issues—summoned him back from what turned out not to have been death, but a secret escape to Tibet where he spent his “lost years” in the guise of a Norwegian explorer and had even met the Dalai Lama (Bishop 2001: 206). In 1908 American Levi H. Dowling was the first (I believe) to account for another set of “lost years”—those of Jesus Christ. Dowling claimed to have transcribed his *Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* from the celestial “Akashic records,” the mystic mind of God accessible to the select through meditation and astral projection. Dowling's *Aquarian Gospel* was only one of many stories according to which, during the decade before Jesus's ministry began, he lived in India and Tibet from whence he introduced Buddhism to the West in the form of Christianity (Bishop 1989: 182).

In the same spirit of *Ex Oriente Lux* (“out of the East, light”), novelist Hermann Hesse (1877–1962) made a literary career and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1946 out of his fascination with South Asian philosophy and Theosophy. In 1911 Hesse traveled to India and later called himself a Hindu (1974: 177). From *Siddhartha* (1922), a novel depicting the life of the Buddha; to *Steppenwolf* (1929), which Hesse claimed was based on Buddhist philosophy; to *Journey to the East* (1932), an allegorical tale of striving for Eastern wisdom, Hesse pointed to “the eternal strivings of the

11. The guru and ashram in Maugham's book are modeled after Sri Ramana Maharshi (1878–1950) whom Maugham visited in 1938 at his ashram at Tiruvannamalai in South India.

12. Maugham's novel was made into a film several times but—tellingly—in the most recent incarnation (1984) the hero's enlightenment occurs not in an Indian Hindu ashram, but in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery (Bishop 2001: 216).

human spirit towards the East, towards Home” (Hesse 1956 [1932]: 13). Like the works of Carl Jung (who also believed that “the East is inside all of us” [in Bishop 1989: 234]), Hesse’s novels underwent a huge popular revival during the 1960s as a new generation of countercultural strivers embarked on their own journeys to the East.

If Hesse’s novels appealed to the philosophically minded, Kipling and Hilton aimed to reach a more mainstream reader. But Tibet and Nepal also showed up in plenty of “low-brow” literature during the early twentieth century. In what was probably its debut before a truly mass audience, Kathmandu was featured in a hugely popular piece of dancehall doggerel entitled “The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God” written in 1911 by J. Milton Hayes. In the style of a Kipling ballad, the poem begins:

There’s a one-eyed yellow idol to the north of Khatmandu [*sic*],
 There’s a little marble cross below the town
 And a broken-hearted woman tends the grave of Mad Carew
 While the yellow god forever gazes down.

Through ten more stanzas we learn of Mad Carew’s brave attempt to snatch the green eye of the little yellow god for his sweetheart, only to be mysteriously murdered (by the god? a vengeful native?). The poem was endlessly recited and parodied in films, radio shows, and songs for generations, especially in Britain, and even made a cameo appearance in John Lennon’s “Nobody Told Me” (1984).¹³ Thanks to Hayes’s poem, for much of the twentieth century far more Britons had heard of Kathmandu than of Nepal.

In the US representations of the Himalayas entered true pulp fiction in the 1940s with the birth of comic book hero the Green Lama—a.k.a. Jethro Dumont, Sorbonne PhD and son of an American millionaire—and his sidekick Dr. Pali, mild-mannered Buddhist priest. The Green Lama had acquired superhuman powers while studying Buddhism in Tibet (at “Drepung College”¹⁴) but returned to New York to put his powers to use fighting evil “Japs” and Nazis. Refusing to carry weapons but able to generate electricity from his body, the Green Lama would levitate into battle—

13. One stanza runs:

Everyone’s a winner, and no one seems to lose.
 There’s a little yellow idol to the north of Katmandu.
 Everybody’s flying and no one leaves the ground.

14. Drepung is the name of an actual ancient monastery on the outskirts of Lhasa.

pecks bulging, dressed in green monk's robes, chanting the Buddhist mantra "Om Mani Padme Hum!"—foiling crime (more or less) nonviolently (Brauen 2004: 119–20).¹⁵

When a genre becomes the object of parody, you know it has reached the popular culture saturation point. Such finally was the fate of Tibet—along with lamas, yaks, explorers, and *orientalia in absurdum*—when in 1931 T. Walter Williams published the first of a six-year series of tongue-in-cheek articles in the *New York Times* chronicling the adventures of Marmaduke M. Mizzle, "the adventurous Mincing Lane caraway seed merchant." Between 1931 and 1937 the newspaper published at least five¹⁶ elaborate farcical accounts of Mizzle's travels and his eventual retirement in a Lamasery in Shigatse. The final installment, featured on the front page, was entitled, "M. M. Mizzle Quits His Lamasery, Pursued by Sable Amazon on Yak: Famous Caraway Seed Expert Also Tires of Tibetan Diet, So He Sets Out for Calcutta—Old Friend Winglefoot, the Tea Taster, Gets News in Letter Written in Lion's Blood." In Williams's spoofs we see that, by the 1930s, the West's romantic fixation on the exotic Himalayas had reached a level of absurdity that suggested the joke was "on us"—as it had been for at least a century before and, to a large extent, still is.

Proto-Tourism: Adventures in "The Last Home of Mystery"

By 1951 even fewer Westerners had visited Kathmandu than Lhasa, the more remote capital of Tibet. Increasingly fearful of their future as dynastic autocrats, the Rana family virtually forbade the movement of foreigners into, or Nepalis out of, Nepal. Above all, the Ranas hoped to prevent in Nepal the nationalist politics that convulsed late colonial India, knowing full well that if the pro-Rana British departed they too would be quickly swept from power.

To do so the Ranas tried to isolate Nepalis from any knowledge of the burgeoning Indian independence movement along with any impression of Westerners that would undermine belief in the legitimacy of British rule in India. From the British perspective, allowing Nepal *de jure* independence provided the Raj with a dependent buffer state along their northern border. Furthermore, as the British became more and more reliant on Nepali "Gurkha" recruits for their imperial armies, maintaining Nepal as

15. For a full "hero history" of The Green Lama, see <http://www.majorspoilers.com/hero-history-the-green-lama>.

16. A *New York Times* archive search for "T. Walter Williams," "Tibet," and "Mizzle" turned up five articles but there may be more.

an isolated feudal state was part of a broader colonial strategy: the British were happy to help the Ranas keep the rest of the world out of Nepal (Landon 1993 [1928], 2:2).

Aside from the small quota of guests allowed to visit the British Resident and his legation in Kathmandu, any Western visitor to Nepal had to have a personal written invitation from the Rana prime minister himself. Among them were a few carefully controlled journalists representing a few hand-picked popular magazines. For example, in the late 1910s and again in the early 1930s Rana rulers allowed *National Geographic* writers and photographers into Nepal on carefully choreographed tours (White 1920; Chetwode 1935). While revealing Nepal's exotic wonders to the world, the results were pro-Rana propaganda screeds with writers like Chetwode heaping praise on the reigning Rana autocrat whom she calls "modern and enlightened in his outlook and anxious to introduce any new invention which may benefit his country" (1935: 328). In fact the Ranas were far more anxious to keep foreigners out and regulate the world's impressions of Nepal.

Aside from Indian Hindu pilgrims,¹⁷ very few foreigners were allowed into Nepal. Of the many who went through the arduous process of applying for a visa at the offices of the Nepal government in Calcutta, very few got the coveted approval by a Rana prime minister (Chand 2000: 11). One of these was E. Alexander Powell (1879–1958), an American who, while visiting Calcutta in 1927, applied for a Nepal visa almost on a whim. To Powell's surprise, Chandra SJB Rana promptly invited him to tour the Kathmandu valley. According to Powell, the prime minister's invitation mentioned that "we have heard much of the great country from which you come and it is a pleasure to welcome you to our small one" (Powell 1929: 116).

It's not hard to imagine that the Ranas, aware of rising US power, were interested in promoting positive relations with the American public. Chandra was also certainly aware that by 1927 Powell had already published fifteen books chronicling his travels in various parts of the world. Though an American, Powell's pro-colonial politics and unmistakable imperial envy must have made him an attractive prospect for another positive popular treatment of Nepal.

The title of Powell's book is as overblown and pretentious as the book itself: *The Last Home of Mystery: Adventures in Nepal, Together with Accounts of Ceylon, British India, the Native States, the Persian Gulf, the Overland Desert Mail and the Baghdad Railway* (1929). Powell's "adventures" consist mainly

17. The exception to Rana Nepal's tourism phobia was the state's tolerance of Hindu travelers visiting religious sites in the Kathmandu valley.

of hobnobbing with Indian princes and British colonial elites, drinking to excess, and making crude sexual innuendos. The book is full of factual errors delivered in a tone of swaggering self-confidence. A contemporary British reviewer captures the book's essence, describing it as "written in modern American journalistic style. Mostly ill-informed and in bad taste" (Morris 1931: 552).

More to the point is Powell's treatment of Nepal. Even though Powell's visit was only one relatively small part of a larger journey, and makes up only a few chapters, the book's title identifies Nepal as the real trophy destination: everywhere else rates as also-visited. Powell explains that

[most of] Nepalese territory has never been trodden by a white man. Unexplored, unmapped, virtually unknown, it is literally the last home of mystery. . . . The adjoining country of Tibet, traditionally regarded as the final great secret of geography [is well explored] and the literature on the subject fills many book shelves. But the bibliography of Nepal consists of less than a score of volumes. (1929: 177)

With the secrets of Tibet now revealed, Nepal—thanks to its autocratic rulers—remained "the last home of mystery."

Powell's account of Nepal follows what was already a standard tourist narrative. Crossing the Indian frontier, he is met by Nepali officials who travel overland with him to the base of the mountains. From there start the author's epic struggles, on horseback or in coolie-carried palanquin, up the rocky trail until finally reaching the summit of the second pass. Below was a vast dazzlingly green level valley, studded with golden-spired cities, threaded with glittering rivers, with a range of magnificent snow-clad mountains spread across the northern horizon. At the foot of the trail automobiles met official visitors (the cars also having been lugged over the same miserable trail by massive teams of porters¹⁸).

For their part, the Ranas scored not just another popular Nepal travelogue, but one that portrayed their regime in the best possible light. Powell described the Rana government as "distinctly progressive, . . . eager to do as much for the welfare of its people as restricted resources and the limitations imposed by nature will permit" (1929: 179). This is regardless of the fact that the modern developments that Powell references—electricity,

18. Stories and photos of vehicles and other massive objects being carried over the passes into the Kathmandu Valley are one of the most frequently recurring themes in Nepal travel literature. One of the most amazing photos is of a large steamroller being dragged by hundreds of porters over wooden rollers up the steep narrow trail. "In its packing-case it looked like a cottage, and beside it stood the overseer singing the solo which the three hundred coolies answer, with a final stacco [*sic*] as they throw their weight on to the ropes. Where we passed it the incline was not steep, but it moved only four inches with each pull" (Harris 1939: 229).

hospital, railway, and aerial ropeway—were all almost exclusively for the use of the Ranas alone. Or that the country’s “restricted resources” were limited mainly due to the fact that the Ranas ran what has been called a “private-enterprise state” (Mihaly 2002 [1965]: 16), systematically pillaging state funds to support their lavish lifestyle. Powell portrays ordinary Nepalis in contrast to the enlightened Ranas and their beneficent governance; he paints Nepalis as backward and ignorant (1929: 179). As for Rana isolationism, Powell explains that it was meant to protect the delicate sensitivities of Nepal’s “liberty-loving mountaineers” (1929: 178). Prime Minister Chandra could hardly have asked for a better white-washing of Rana Nepal’s autocratic rule than Powell’s *Last Home of Mystery*.

Fewer than around 150 Westerners visited Kathmandu in the first half of the twentieth century. Of them many wrote books prominently featuring their Nepal visits,¹⁹ and none could resist congratulating themselves on having reached a location that was already highly exoticized in the Western imagination. In the early 1930s Etherton explained that

Kathmandu has become an almost legendary capital associated with romantic poetry and mysterious yellow idols. There are so few un-trodden places left in the world for European feet that the last of them, of necessity, impose a peculiar and an added appeal upon the mind. (1934: 14)

In the late 1940s visiting American Dillon Ripley called Kathmandu “a secluded storied city, out of the world, beyond time, the ‘Jewel in the Lotus’” (1952: 2).²⁰ *Newsweek* magazine’s first-ever article on Nepal was titled “Nepal: Welcome to Shangri-La” and referred to “the Shangri-La valley of Katmandu” (*Newsweek* 1947: 40). Prefigured by yellow idols, stories of Buddhist wonderlands, and images of Shangri-La, Kathmandu had acquired the romantic appeal once reserved for Lhasa.

The End of an Era

By the 1940s the geopolitical tectonics of South and Central Asia were rapidly shifting. With Indian independence increasingly a matter of *when not if*, Nepal’s Rana rulers were desperate to find new foreign patrons

19. These include Dekobra 1930, Elwes 1930, Etherton 1934, Harris 1939, Cutting 1940, and MacKenzie 1949.

20. Ripley later became secretary of the Smithsonian Institution but during World War II served with the forerunner of the CIA as a spy in Asia. See Lewis 2002 for a convincing argument that Ripley’s 1947 visit to Nepal was likely a spy mission, not the birding expedition that he claimed.

who might help prop up their anachronistic feudal state. As the British emerged from World War II severely weakened, the Ranas made diplomatic overtures to other European nations, but especially to the United States (as discussed in chapter 2). Following Indian independence in 1947, the Ranas played the ever more dangerous game of selectively opening their country to outsiders while ruthlessly suppressing political dissent.

One of the most interesting Rana strategies involved mountaineering. After having denied the British access to the Himalayan peaks for decades, in 1950 the Ranas suddenly approved British and French bids to climb Annapurna. Led by Maurice Herzog, the successful French expedition was the first ever to climb over eight thousand meters. (By contrast, the poorly planned British effort was a complete failure and got no publicity [Roberts n.d.a.].) Ultimately it was too little too late for the Ranas, but Herzog's climb (and his best-selling 1952 book) helped thrust Nepal back into the world's attention.

In the 1940s Tibetan authorities too were worried about their future in a changing world. For the previous thirty years Tibet had enjoyed an anxious autonomy as China slid into civil war following the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. But with a Communist victory immanent, Tibetan unease turned into distress. For the first time in its history, in 1948 the Tibetan government sent delegations to India, the United States, and Europe hoping to secure support for its claims to national independence. Then in 1949, taking a page from the Rana regime's public relations play-book, the Tibetans uncharacteristically granted a request from veteran American journalist and broadcaster Lowell Thomas²¹ (and his son Lowell Thomas Jr.) to come to Lhasa, hoping to use the American's star power to bring Tibet's plight to world attention. Thomas's trip was also a coup for CBS radio. Thomas's taped interviews and reportage—the first ever from Tibet—“had an enormous impact on listeners when they aired back in the United States” (Schell 2000: 265). The Thomases also rehearsed the role of “Ugly American” tourists, arriving in Lhasa with strikingly inappropriate gifts for the young fourteenth Dalai Lama: a waste-paper basket made from the leg of an elephant (Buddhists oppose killing animals) and an ivory cigarette holder (the Dalai Lama did not smoke and in fact tobacco was officially banned in Tibet) (Selby 2008: 55, Tuladhar 2004: 50).

Nevertheless, Thomas's broadcasts were well-received by the American public, as was Thomas Jr.'s book (1950). Conditioned by a century of romanticized depictions of the Himalayan region, many people were al-

21. By the time Thomas (1892–1981) was invited to Tibet he was immediately familiar to American media consumers. In 1930 Thomas became the first person to host a television news broadcast and for decades was the narrating voice of the ubiquitous “Movietone” newsreels.

ready inclined to support Tibet. But with the specter of world communism looming, the idea of the archetypically evil Reds invading the archetypically peace-loving Tibetans made for an emotionally charged view of Tibet's fate (even if the Western powers did almost nothing to support Tibetan autonomy). In October 1950 the Chinese People's Liberation Army moved into Tibet, overcoming armed resistance until finally taking Lhasa in the early 1950s and eventually forcing the Dalai Lama to flee to India in 1959. By fateful coincidence, the Red Army's invasion of Tibet corresponded with the turbulent last days of the Rana regime in Nepal, which finally ended in February 1951 with the triumphal return of King Tribhuvan. With the almost simultaneous closure of Tibet and opening of Nepal, the fantasies, projections, and longings that had been focused on Tibet now shifted to Nepal. Nepal—"the Last Home of Mystery"—was finally open for business, and the world was waiting at its doors.

Making Nepal a Destination: The Cultural Politics of Early Tourism

I do not think I have ever felt so far out of the world.

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT IN KATHMANDU, 1952

Even if the world's imagination was primed for a place like Nepal following World War II, Nepal itself was far from being a tourist destination—the particular kind of *place* capable of recognizing and accommodating the particular kind of *person* known as a tourist. A host of complicated and contentious transformations had to occur before the conceptual *space* Nepal occupied in the West's imagination could be transposed onto an actual *place* ready for tourists to occupy.

First and foremost was the problem that in 1951 Nepal did not officially exist in the emerging system of nation-states. Before it could recognize tourists, Nepal itself had to become a recognized place. In 1951 this was by no means a foregone conclusion. Nepal's history of de facto (if not de jure) dependence on British colonial India meant that its sovereign status vis-à-vis independent India was unclear—a fact that Indian leaders often observed, to the dismay of Nepalis. Had Nepal not been identified as a Cold War “frontline state” bordering Communist China, its fate *might* have been similar to Sikkim or Kashmir, other quasi-independent Raj-era Himalayan territories swallowed up by India after 1947. Instead, the Red Chinese invasion of Tibet transformed Nepal into a player in a new great geopolitical game. Nepali leaders skill-

fully used their new status to ward off unwanted Indian advances, and to play the great powers against each other in competitions to provide “development aid.”

A second transformation that had to occur before Nepal could become a tourist destination was more subtle but no less challenging. Nepal may have triggered visions of tourism in Western minds, but this was certainly not the case for Nepalis. Emerging from a century of isolation, dazzled by social and technological advances that seemed to have left them behind, and enthusiastically embracing the rhetoric of “modernization” and “development,” it was almost impossible for even the most cosmopolitan Nepalis to imagine why foreigners would *want* to come to Nepal. For Nepalis things like mountains, temples, festivals, and rustic lifestyles were the very obstacles that stood between them and modernity. It was only as tourist dollars began to flow that Nepalis grasped the meaning of tourism and the financial implications of Western fantasies.

Finally, before Nepal could become a tourist destination, it had to have the accoutrements of tourism. In 1951 Kathmandu essentially had no hotels or restaurants; no taxis, guides, or maps; no travel agencies or booking offices. There was no commercial air service into the country. There was not even a motor-able road linking Kathmandu with the outside world. There was no government agency capable of regulating visitors. There was no such thing as a tourist visa. Nepal could not be a tourist destination until it had a tourist infrastructure and policies that acknowledged the existence of tourists.

Nepal and the Rise of the Postwar Interstate System

The decades before and after World War II saw a profound shift in global relations and systems of power. In place of colonial dependencies emerged a new system of interstate relations in which a world of independent sovereign nation-states interacted in an ostensibly democratic system of mutually beneficial international cooperation and free trade. Though certainly an advance over colonialism, the postwar world order was hardly as benign as its major proponent, the United States, claimed. Catapulted into the position of reigning world superpower, and eager to translate its economic might into political power, after World War II the US championed the cause of decolonization in the name of freedom and human rights. The US held up the vision of a world of United Nations, each formally equal and free to (peacefully) pursue its own interests—interests that were increasingly construed to be *economic* interests. Along with the

United Nations, the US led the way in establishing huge new global financial institutions—the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and others—that reconstituted interstate relations as economic relations, facilitating and safeguarding the movement of capital around the world. In the new world of independent nation-states and free trade, military conquest was condemned but corporations were freed to “compete” in the new global market.¹

Whereas nineteenth-century British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli had justified British imperialism in the name of spreading British civilization (something that all people would naturally wish to acquire and against which only ignorance and despotism could stand), in the 1940s and 1950s the United States advocated national self-determination, democracy, open doors, progress, freedom, and free trade (things that all people would naturally wish to acquire and against which only ignorance and despotism could stand). In the postwar global arena a modern, US-backed “development” doctrine replaced Britain’s old “civilizing mission” as the principle Third World “transition narrative”—the story of what every nation *should become* but can only accomplish under the (ostensibly disinterested) tutelage of an external power (Chakrabarty 2000:30). To any new postcolonial nation-state the US would offer “aid” to help set it on the road to development, modernization, and open markets.

Given Rana Nepal’s need for patronage (as Britain prepared to withdraw from India) and the United States’ drive to replace the old colonial world with a new system of independent nation-states (atomized and easier to control bilaterally), it is not surprising that these two parties found each other in the years following World War II. Notably the US did not wait until *after* Nepal had thrown off its dictatorial, autocratic rulers before inviting it into the fold of independent sovereign nations. In 1944 and 1945 the US sent officials to Kathmandu seeking to establish direct political and economic ties (Satterthwaite 1947:10). Once they received the US’s official recognition of their independence in a proclamation from President Truman in March 1947 (USIS 1997:10), by April 1947 Rana Nepal was ready to sign an Agreement of Commerce and Friendship (Satterthwaite 1947:37)² making the US only the second nation (after Britain) to establish full diplomatic relations with Nepal.

Against India’s wishes, in 1949 the US officially supported Nepal’s

1. My understanding of post–World War II geopolitics draws significantly from the work of Kelly and Kaplan 2001, Mitchell 2002, and Chakrabarty 2000.

2. Coverage of the Satterthwaite mission marks Nepal’s first headlined appearance in the pages of *Time* (1947) and *Newsweek* (1947). (A few earlier articles mentioned Nepal in the context of other news events.)

unsuccessful bid to be admitted into the United Nations (USIS 1997:15). Already concerned over the US's aggressive wooing of Nepal before 1947, independent India saw American interest in Nepal as a threat to Indian authority on the subcontinent (Mihaly 2002:30). India envisioned itself replacing Britain as South Asia's paramount power and did not welcome American meddling with what had been a (colonial) Indian dependent state.

India got its chance to influence Nepal's course in the dramatic events that unfolded in 1950 leading to the end of Rana rule. Aware of rising anti-Rana agitation, Nepal's King Tribhuvan began plotting a bid to include the long-disempowered monarchy in the inevitable post-Rana political scene. With help from the new Indian Ambassador in Kathmandu, Tribhuvan devised a daring escape from the virtual house arrest that he and his predecessors had lived under for the previous century. Ostensibly off on a picnic, in November 1950 Tribhuvan and most of his family veered their cars into the Indian Embassy compound, claimed political asylum, and managed to negotiate safe passage to India.³ The Ranas quickly declared that Tribhuvan had abdicated and named one of the king's grandsons, Gyanendra, the new puppet monarch. In the US *Time* and *Newsweek* reported the event, the former concluding that "Shri 3 [the Rana ruler] Wins Again" (*Time* 1950).

In fact *Time* had called the fight too soon. In Delhi an alliance between the king, the exiled Nepal Congress Party, and the US ultimately forced the Ranas to recognize Tribhuvan as constitutional monarch of a new democratic state. On January 23, 1951, Tribhuvan (still in exile in Delhi) signed the momentous General Agreement for Technical Cooperation between Nepal and the United States, thereby allowing the US to launch an aggressive foreign aid and development agenda in Nepal (Wood 1987:3). Tribhuvan's triumphant return to Kathmandu on February 18, 1951, officially marked the end of Rana rule but, with both India and the US hoping to shape Nepal's standing in the postcolonial world, it did not clearly resolve the exact nature of Nepal's sovereignty.

In the inaugural address for his first (elected) term as president of the US, in January 1949 Harry Truman announced an aggressive new foreign policy objective to provide technical assistance to "developing countries" which were undergoing a "revolution of rising expectations." In the context of the Cold War if "rising expectations" went unmet, "frus-

3. Tribhuvan flew out of the Kathmandu Valley with the Indian Ambassador to Nepal, Surjit Singh Majithia, in the ambassador's four-seat Beachcraft Bonanza aircraft. Majithia is usually credited with being the first person to land an aircraft in the Kathmandu Valley (in April 1949) (M. B. Shrestha 2000:36, Leuchtag 1958:144).

trated millions would turn to radical political solutions,” a.k.a., communism (Mihaly 2002:3). On the borders of Communist China (with quasi-independent Tibet already a victim), for Americans, Nepal had to be turned into a bulwark against the Red Menace.

The US dispatched its first “Point IV” representatives to Nepal⁴ in January 1952 with Paul W. Rose as director of the United States Technical Cooperation Mission to Nepal (or TCM⁵). Point IV policy was based on the belief that US advisors sharing know-how and modeling hard work would act as a “catalyst” for rapid change. With Nepalis eager to embrace new knowledge and radically transform their society (US reasoning went), modernization was merely a “technical” problem (Hindman 2002) to be solved “within a relatively short time” (Mihaly 2002:32). Eleanor Roosevelt, who visited Rose and other Point IV advisors in 1952, presumably echoed the patronizing opinions of her hosts when she wrote:

The Nepalese seemed to me quiet, gentle and hard-working, people you could like but who would have little ability to achieve the things they wanted by themselves. It will take wise leadership and intelligent help from outside to prepare them for living in a democracy. (Roosevelt 1953:211)

The US quickly discovered, however, that “wise leadership and intelligent help” was useless without a government apparatus in place capable of actually *receiving* “technical assistance” in the name of the state. Official US policy soon shifted from catalysis to “capacity building” with American advisors helping to establish government ministries capable of managing and spearheading “development” of all kinds. Thus by 1960 the main result of US development aid to Nepal had been the creation of a bureaucratic apparatus that “could not carry on without American technicians or funds,” manned by an educated middle class who proved to be “the main beneficiary of the government expansion” (Mihaly 2002:87–88). The US had not catalyzed much development but it had created something approaching a client state.

By the mid-1950s there were four main factions in Nepali politics—the Nepal Congress Party (NCP), a Rana-backed party, Nepali communists of various stripes, and the king—each of which viewed US intentions differently. Long at odds, the Ranas and the NCP effectively neutralized each

4. “Point IV” programs were named for the fourth agenda item in President Truman’s January 1949 inaugural address. For more detail on the program and its implementation in Nepal, see Hindman 2002.

5. The TCM was soon renamed the US Operations Mission (USOM) and later the US Agency for International Development, Nepal (or USAID, Nepal).

other, while factional bickering among communist groups effectively neutralized them, leaving the king as the only real power (Mihaly 2002:24). But whereas King Tribhuvan had been a reluctant dictator, after Tribhuvan's death in March 1955 his son Mahendra eagerly embraced the role. Mahendra's approach was to bully and divide the opposition so as to protect royal authority. He repeatedly condemned Nepal's political parties for ineffective governance even while actively undermining the government's cohesion (Mihaly 2002:65).

Mahendra cleverly took the Truman Doctrine and ran with it—but not in the direction that the US had hoped. Rather than accepting the status of US Cold War client state, Mahendra set out to recruit as many foreign powers as possible, from across the ideological spectrum, in a game of competitive patronage (Croes 2006:13). The year 1955 “saw the beginnings of the international scramble to aid Nepal” with China, Russia, India, and others vying for Nepal's political loyalties in a veritable Cold War auction (Mihaly 2002:101). Mahendra used foreign aid both to prop up his domestic legitimacy (as “father of development” in Nepal), and to (hopefully) neutralize world powers by turning the Cold War into a bidding war.

Another important aim of Mahendra's policy of courting international donors was to literally increase foreign investment in Nepal's status as a sovereign state. Even after Nepal's official admission into the United Nations in 1955 (despite “stiff opposition” from India and Russia [Chand 2000:31]), its status vis-à-vis India remained tenuous. Independent India made it clear that it viewed Nepal as lying within its sphere of influence often treating Nepal more like a domestic territory than an independent state: Indian aid came through domestic, not international channels; Indian-funded projects in Nepal (airports, roads) had clear strategic value to India and were built by the Indian Army, not civilian, engineers (Mihaly 2002:51–52). Indian Prime Minister Nehru said that, with regard to China, “we consider the Himalayan mountains our border” (Mihaly 2002:50). Playing on Indian anxieties, in 1956 Mahendra negotiated new treaties with China that paid off in a whopping, no-strings-attached grant of 126 million dollars (Mihaly 2002:67). Mahendra adeptly played the powers against each other and ended up with (literally) more money than Nepal knew what to do with.

While mouthing support for democracy to Western donor states, in fact Mahendra did everything in his power to squelch any electoral process that he thought might diminish royal power. Mahendra repeatedly postponed elections and decreed a constitution that reserved wide-ranging emergency powers for the Crown, including suspending the constitution itself (Rose 1965:352). With elections finally set for 1959, the US

decided to covertly influence the process in hopes of keeping royalists and communists out of power. The Nepal Congress Party led by Bishweshwar Prasad (“B. P.”) Koirala (1914–1982) was the clear favorite of India *and* the US (in spite of Koirala’s mild socialist leanings). In his memoirs, CIA agent Duane Clarridge describes giving Koirala a large sum of cash as a “means to bolster the Nepali democratic process”—with authorization coming all the way from CIA chief Allen Dulles (1997:65–66). King Mahendra soon caught wind of the US largess to his rivals and informed the US Ambassador that he too would appreciate some “election assistance”!⁶ In fact the NCP won the election in a landslide making B. P. Koirala the country’s first elected prime minister. Koirala’s signature legislation—redistributing land to the poor and taxing large property owners—was widely popular but posed a direct threat to the king and other entrenched elites.

Enraged by Koirala’s populism (and popularity), on December 15, 1960, Mahendra staged a bloodless royal coup d’état. He dissolved Parliament, banned all political parties, and arrested Koirala and most other prominent political figures, accusing them of “ruining the nation in the name of democracy” (Mihaly 2002:126). In an interview with *Time* magazine, Mahendra whined, “The Koirala government was always trying to put me in an awkward position. . . . It preached that the King was standing in the way of reform.” As for Koirala’s proposed property tax, *Time* quotes Mahendra as asking, “Why should we pay taxes when we can always get more money from the Americans?” (*Time* 1961:27–28). He had a point. By the early 1960s, “Nepal was,” in the words of one foreign expert, “being smothered in foreign aid” (Wood 1987:189). With the US (and other countries) bankrolling the state, why raise taxes on Nepal’s ruling class and risk alienating Mahendra’s main power base? Reasoning that “any anti-communist government is a good government,” the US ultimately stood behind Mahendra⁷ as it did with other “dictator democracies” (Egypt, Yugoslavia, Indonesia) around the world (Mihaly 2002:139).

Thus was born Mahendra’s infamous party-less “Panchayat Democracy,” a system of autocratic royal rule backed by a rubber-stamp parliament. Organized politics went underground and, aside from a brief NCP armed insurrection in 1962, waited decades for a change of political cli-

6. Clarridge describes a tense meeting at the palace during which he placed “an envelope” on a table after trying to make small talk with a “clearly uncomfortable” Mahendra sporting his trademark dark glasses and blank, mask-like face (1997:68–69).

7. The almost simultaneous Cuban Missile Crisis and Chinese invasion of contested areas along India’s Himalayan border (Morin 1995:67) must have contributed to the US’s willingness to turn a blind eye to Mahendra’s antidemocratic scheming.

mate. Far from holding Mahendra accountable, foreign donors rewarded him, heaping vast amounts of aid money onto Nepal and transforming the country into what one USAID worker dubbed a “development laboratory” (Fujikura 1996:271) and its people into more or less helpless lab animals.

The foreign press quickly lost interest in Nepal, its experiment in democratic governance temporarily over. Between 1947 and 1961 the American newsmagazines *Time* and *Newsweek* had published a combined total of thirty-two articles on Nepal (> 2.25/year), almost all of them political reportage. But from 1962 to 1980 there were only thirteen articles on Nepal (ca. 0.7/year), almost all of them on popular culture topics such as mountaineering. Even as Nepal gradually drifted out of the world’s political consciousness (and conscience), attention was shifting to other popular Western media that picked up coverage of Nepal, now portrayed as an exotic tourism destination.

Diplomatic Tourism: 1951–1955

With the arrival of the first resident foreigners in the early 1950s a small, tight-knit “expat” community soon developed. Representing various diplomatic and aid missions (but dominated by Americans), almost all foreigners living in Nepal had diplomatic status. With the exception of Indian citizens, foreigners wishing to visit Nepal had to have either a diplomatic passport or a personal invitation from someone who did. Almost immediately Nepal—the “Once Forbidden Kingdom”—became a prized vacation destination for US diplomatic personnel stationed around Asia (Dammann 1995:58) and friends of resident foreigners (Wood 1987:82). But for anyone else “formalities were long and difficult” with visas granted only to foreigners with “specific objectives and well-guaranteed credentials” (Peissel 1966:46, Dammann 1995:151).⁸ Even though foreigners were eager to get into Nepal, Nepali officials were not eager to fling open the doors. That Nepal might benefit from casual foreign visitors, or even that people might want to visit Nepal for no apparent reason, never crossed Nepali officialdom’s mind.

One problem for early visitors was that, unless you knew someone, there was essentially nowhere to stay. Except for a few rather primitive establishments catering to Indian travelers, there was nothing approximating the Western idea of a “hotel.” Visitors either stayed with resident

8. The fact that Americans were the first to establish a sizable resident community may explain why a very high percentage of early visitors were from the US.

foreigners or, in a practice that increased over time, rented furnished homes or apartments from Rana elites on the outskirts of town. Before long enterprising Nepalis began building rental housing for foreigners on what was then farmland outside the old city. As more and more foreigners arrived and as wealthy Nepalis joined them, these expat enclaves grew into some of Kathmandu's earliest residential suburbs.⁹

With the exception of the cosmopolitan elite, few Nepalis were initially comfortable with foreigners. Beyond the obvious language and cultural differences there were significant caste-related problems. Not only were Westerners non-Hindus and therefore untouchable, but their beef-eating ways also made them almost literally repulsive. Many early expats describe working amicably with Nepali counterparts, sometimes for years, without ever being invited to their homes or being introduced to family members. One Nepali recalled a rare home visit by a European visitor in the early 1950s. He remembered the foreigner being served tea while visiting with his father on the ground floor¹⁰ of the family's home in the old city. The visit was exciting but, once the foreigner left, everything he touched was thrown out and the women in the household spent days ritually purifying the entire house (five floors) top to bottom! One foreigner remembered how ordering tea at a roadside tea shop caused a minor riot among patrons worried that his presence would ritually contaminate their food (Eskelund 1960:18). Concerns over ritual purity were longstanding (Liechty 1997) and made it awkward for Nepalis to interact with foreigners even if they were eager to do so.

Enjoying huge salaries by local standards, foreigners wanted to hire Nepali domestic staff but often had to literally import servants from India in the early 1950s (Dammann 1995:68). Eventually low-caste Nepalis (people with little "purity" to lose) began working for foreigners, but finding local cooks was still almost impossible. Because food and food transactions are highly susceptible to ritual contamination according to orthodox Hindu belief (Liechty 2005), Nepali elites employed Brahmans (the highest caste rank) as cooks. But with Brahmans unwilling to really interact with untouchable foreigners, the only people foreigners could get to cook for them were from the absolute lowest local caste groups (Wood 1987:93, 204).¹¹ Given Nepalis' discomfort over physical contact, more than a few

9. For example, places like Kalimati, Ghantaghar, and Lazimpat. I am grateful to Purna Harsha Bajracharya for pointing this out.

10. Any Nepali would have been insulted to be offered food on the ground floor, the least auspicious, most ritually impure part of a Nepali house.

11. A few of these low-caste cooks went on to become pioneers in the city's budget-class tourism industry (see chapter 6).

people noted the irony of the USOM's official logo which depicted two hands clasped in a (for Nepalis, polluting) handshake. Nepalis had plenty of cultural barriers to overcome before they were ready to truly accept foreigners. Yet the lure of tourist dollars offered them plenty of incentives to overcome their caste-based religious scruples.

Early Tourism: If You Build It, They Will Come

People who visited Kathmandu in the 1950s and 1960s often complained that there was “only one hotel” or “there were no restaurants at all.” But hotels and restaurants were there even if some visitors didn't recognize them as such. Kathmandu had been a trade and pilgrimage destination for millennia with travelers carrying their own bedding and cooking equipment and essentially camping in public shelters. The Ranas also built a number of official guesthouses. By at least the 1940s Kathmandu saw its first “hotels”—businesses offering rooms for a fee—along New Road, the city's main commercial thoroughfare. Catering mainly to Indian business travelers, the Himalayan Hotel and Paras Hotel provided neither bedding nor meals and did not have modern toilet or bathing facilities. The first establishments approximating what a Westerner would recognize as restaurants (as opposed to tea or snack shops) were also on New Road and catered to the same mainly Indian clientele.¹²

Chand calls the Nepal Hotel “probably the first quality hotel” in Kathmandu (2000:51). In 1952 vacationing US State Department employee Nancy Dammann picked the Nepal Hotel after learning that Kathmandu's two other “hotels” had neither plumbing nor toilets. Part of a converted Rana palace, the Nepal Hotel provided meals but not bedding. Rooms featured marble floors, ornate furniture, portraits of Ranas on the walls, and a bathroom with a faucet and an Asian-style toilet (1995:58). Once other higher-quality hotels opened, the Nepal Hotel seemed to have shut its doors.

Around late 1952 Thomas Mendies, an enterprising Anglo-Indian (an Indian citizen of mixed Asian and European descent), opened the first relatively successful foreign-class hotel in Nepal: the Snow View located in Lazimpat, a few kilometers north of the old city (Adhikari 2005a). After Indian independence Anglo-Indians faced uncertain futures and while

12. The Rangana Café (Dammann 1995:81) and Rendezvous Restaurant (Chand 2000:51) on New Road were, in the early 1950s, basically Indian hangouts serving Indian food and perhaps therefore not “real” restaurants in the minds of some early Western visitors. The first Kathmandu guidebook barely mentions restaurants outside of the few Western-standard hotels; see Shrestha 1956:22.

many immigrated to Europe, Mendies made his way to Kathmandu in the early 1950s apparently motivated both by commercial and Christian missionary interests. Mendies purchased a large house and renovated it into a hotel featuring four rooms with private baths, nine with a shared bath, and a dining room that could seat seventy-five. He installed electric lighting, hired and trained a staff of local boys (including orphans), and offered sightseeing tours in his army surplus jeep (Adhikari 2005a). Visitors describe the Snow View as “shoddily furnished” but clean, with Bibles by every bed and Christian prints on the walls. Completing the somewhat puritanical atmosphere, Mendies refused to sell alcohol or cigarettes to his craving guests (Morris 1963:52).¹³

When it came to tourism, Mendies was a visionary but one slightly too far ahead of the curve. Business was poor. With few tourists arriving at his door, Mendies soon resorted to meeting every incoming plane, hoping to snare the rare visitor who hadn’t already arranged lodging (Adhikari 2005a). He also had to periodically fly to Patna in north India to stock up on basic hotel supplies such as butter, jam, cheese, coffee, and toilet paper (Adhikari 2001). For extra income Mendies opened the Snow View’s dining room to adventuresome Nepalis and resident foreigners, offering special meals on Western holidays.

In February 1956 Mendies married Elizabeth McDonald, a Canadian missionary who had been working with the Salvation Army in Calcutta (Adhikari 2005b). Together they tried to keep the Snow View afloat with Betty Mendies now meeting airplanes and trying to steer tourists their way (Rai 2005a). But business was still terrible. At one point in 1956 the Snow View went three months without a single guest (Adhikari 2005b).

Finally the couple had the idea of converting the Snow View’s dining room into a Chinese restaurant. They hired two Chinese immigrants from Calcutta, a Mr. Wong and a Mr. Fong, and opened the new restaurant on March 27, 1957, to much acclaim. On the first day Mendies served the American Ambassador to Nepal, other foreigners, affluent locals including Ranas and royalty, and Nepal government officials. From then on the restaurant was a popular spot for the city’s upper crust (Adhikari 2005b, 2005c). Encountering noodles for the first time, some people were turned off by their resemblance to worms but gradually locals acquired a taste for Chinese food (Adhikari 2005c). One of the restaurant’s regulars was Nepal Congress Party leader B. P. Koirala. During his years in prison following the royal coup of 1961, Mendies often took food to Koirala, no doubt the

13. Even today Kathmandu old-timers remember the Snow View with suspicion, repeating rumors of Mendies trying to convert his boys to Christianity, and speculating on whether the business was a front for then-banned missionary activity.



1 Kathmandu Taxis, Dec. 1956. Courtesy of Anatol Eberhard.

first Chinese “take-out” in Nepali history (Adhikari 2005c)! Their Chinese restaurant helped the Mendieses pull through until tourist arrivals began to pick up in the late 1950s and the Snow View Hotel continued at least into the early 1970s (Raj 1973:17).¹⁴

The Royal Hotel

For tourism to have any chance of developing in Nepal, two basic things had to happen: the government had to recognize the existence and desirability of tourists by issuing tourist visas, and Kathmandu hotels had to establish links with international tour and travel agencies. By the early 1950s plenty of Nepali elites were aware of tourism, but the thought of Kathmandu becoming a tourist destination never crossed their minds. A retired Nepali official who had worked with American development advisors in the early 1950s described how

soon some Americans from the [USOM] suggested to some people in the government that maybe they ought to set up a tourism department. Those government people,

14. In 1961 the couple opened an orphanage called “Mendies’ Haven” and eventually shifted their full attention to that cause. Tom Mendies died in 1990 but “Mummy Mendies” continued running their children’s home in Kathmandu (Rai 2005a).

their first response was, “Tourism? What’s that?” Then the Americans explained that, well, that’s where people from other countries come to your country to see what things are like. All they [the Nepalis] could respond was [by saying], “Why would they want to come here?” But then someone said, “No, we can show them our black-topped road, and some of our new tall buildings, and also we can go out in the night and show them our street lights all in a row.” [laughter] When the Americans said that “yes, those things are very nice, but they really want to see the temples, the festivals, the mountains,” the Nepali officials just smiled and thought [to themselves] that these Americans were mad!

The other basic challenge facing the nascent tourism industry in Kathmandu was simply access to tourists. Travel was much more awkward, time-consuming, and expensive than it is today. Commercial air service was mainly *intra*-continental: most people continued to cross the Atlantic and Pacific by ship even if they traveled across Europe and Asia by plane. Because of the time and expense involved, through the 1950s most world travelers were wealthy retirees, 80 percent of whom were Americans (Satyal 1999:75). Additionally, in an era before easy telecommunications, making arrangements for a long trip was so complicated that it *required* a travel agent working in conjunction with tour operators around the world. For Nepal to become a destination it had to tap into this stream—something that Tom Mendies at the Snow View Hotel was unable to do.

In Nepal the person responsible for making breakthroughs with both tourist visas and the travel industry was Boris Lissanevitch. In the world of Nepali tourism, Lissanevitch is a legendary (somewhat tragic) character—often dubbed “the father of tourism”—and I will be devoting a full chapter (see chapter 4) to his story. Known then and now simply as “Boris,” I will refer to him by his first name. From 1955 to 1969 Boris ran the Royal Hotel in Kathmandu, Nepal’s first successful tourist hotel. Featured in scores of Western popular media write-ups about Nepal, Boris became an attraction in and of himself, his fame so great that it eventually rankled King Mahendra and other royals who contributed to his downfall.

In the last decades of the Rana era Nepal’s King Tribhuvan traveled to Calcutta periodically, mainly for medical treatment, though always under the watchful eyes of his Rana handlers who were intent on keeping their figurehead king just that. In Calcutta Tribhuvan met Boris who, by the late 1930s, had become manager and charismatic front-man of the 300 Club, a glitzy private association patronized mainly by wealthy Indians, including many of the princes and maharajas that had been excluded from snooty (racist) British clubs (Sinha 2001). The Ranas too were members and, when in Calcutta, frequented the 300 Club. There Tribhuvan and Boris met and

became fast friends. Boris is said to have arranged clandestine meetings between the king and Nepali anti-Rana opposition figures living in India. Following Tribhuvan's triumphal return to Kathmandu in 1951, Boris and his Danish wife, Inger, were among the first people the king invited to visit Nepal as his personal guests. According to Inger, "We immediately fell in love with the country. It was, 'This is where we want to live.'" (Rai 2005b).

It was Boris who first pitched the idea of tourism to a skeptical king. Despite their doubts, Boris convinced the king and his son Prince Basundhara to help him lease a large Rana palace on the outskirts of town. In 1954 Boris and Inger imported materials from Calcutta and, with a crew of Nepali and Indian craftsmen, renovated the first two floors of the palace. They partitioned rooms and added private baths sufficient to accommodate twenty-five people, roughly the passenger load of a DC3 aircraft. In February 1955 the hotel was ready for guests but, despite Boris's pleading, the government still would not issue tourist visas. Finally, in March 1955, Boris convinced Tribhuvan to admit a select group of tourists. His money tied up in the renovated palace, Boris gambled that the royals would relax visa restrictions if they could actually see tourists enjoying themselves in Nepal.

The story of the first visitors is an almost mythical affair in the annals of Nepal tourism. In 1980 Boris reminisced:

I can remember the very first tourist agent representing Thomas Cook who, in October 1954, asked my help in opening up Nepal to travelers. . . . King Tribhuvan was away in Switzerland [where he died shortly thereafter] so it was to Crown Prince Mahendra that I took my request. His Royal Highness thought it a good idea but wondered what foreign visitors would want to see and buy in Nepal. In February 1955,¹⁵ when I ran the Royal Hotel, the first tourists ever visited Kathmandu. There were about 20 of them, mostly elderly ladies and all very rich. They fell madly in love with Kathmandu and bought all the local arts and crafts I had on display in the hotel. His Royal Highness Prince Mahendra was present and immediately turning to some officials with him, commanded that tourist visas should be introduced. (in Satyal 1999:74–75)

Boris's wager had paid off—the tourism door had been thrown open—but Tribhuvan's death was a bad omen. Without his close friend and royal patron, Boris's position in the big-fish-infested small pond of Kathmandu was precarious.

Key to Boris's initial and ongoing success was his ties to the Thomas

15. Here Boris's memory was a bit off. Worldwide media coverage of the event places the first tourists' arrival in late March 1955.

Cook travel agency. Probably the leading travel and tour operator in the 1950s, Thomas Cook had offices around the world including in India. According to one of Boris's friends, it was a Thomas Cook agent in Bombay who suggested that Boris open a hotel in Kathmandu. Several luxury cruise lines were bringing tourists to Indian ports from where passengers flew to sightseeing destinations around the subcontinent. The agent reportedly told Boris, "We'd charter a flight to Kathmandu if there was a hotel."

Thus Nepal's first official tourists were passengers on the RMS Caronia, a British Cunard Line cruise ship. In an era when most ocean liners still served the utilitarian function of hauling people across oceans, the Caronia was the first of a new breed that turned cruising into a luxury holiday. Launched in 1947 the Caronia was the first ship with a swimming pool, a bathroom in every cabin, and air-conditioning. In 1951 the Caronia began specializing in round-the-world tours for very wealthy clients and was soon dubbed "the Cunard dollar factory" by the *New York Times* (Rosenthal 1955). In late March 1955 twenty-four wealthy cruisers disembarked from the Caronia at Bombay and flew to Kathmandu. After perfectly playing their epic roles as eager, conspicuously consuming elites, the group flew back to Madras where they rejoined the Caronia.

Though hardly an earth-shaking event, Nepal's tourism debut received heavy press coverage. The *New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and other newspapers ran articles, most stressing how few foreigners had previously entered the "once forbidden territory" (*Chicago Daily Tribune* 1955). *Travel* magazine ran a feature and even *Newsweek* gushed about the tourists' trip "Into a 'Forbidden Land'" (1955). The *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed Kathmandu "the new million-dollar word in travel," destined to join Bali and Tahiti "in every around-the-world folder" (Hemphill 1956). But the article that most captured the US public's imagination was the four-page photo spread in *Life*—the leading mass-circulation magazine of its time—showing nattily dressed matrons at the Royal Hotel and visiting sites in the old city (*Life* 1955). For countless Americans this *Life* feature confirmed that Kathmandu was no longer some quasi-mythical Shangri-La, or rugged outpost fit only for mountaineers, but an actual *tourist destination*—a place that, with enough money and time, one could visit in relative comfort and safety.

Newsweek magazine called these first guests at the Royal Hotel "ordinary tourists" (1955:36) but they certainly wouldn't be ordinary by today's standards. They were among the world's wealthiest people and it's crucial to understand that the people who visited Nepal *as tourists* in the decade or so after Boris opened the Royal Hotel in 1955 were, of necessity, rich. Other Westerners came to Nepal as mountaineers and a few really

adventuresome types managed to make it to Kathmandu overland on a shoestring budget, but the vast majority of those who showed up at the Royal Hotel were big shots. For people invested in fashion and conspicuous consumption, Kathmandu was a whimsical and chic place to go. Notably absent from this mindset was the spiritual, mystical attitude that the next generation of travelers to Nepal brought with them. What lured these elite tourists to Kathmandu in the 1950s and 1960s were the floods of mountaineering and travel images appearing in magazines like *National Geographic* and *Life* billing Nepal as a land of heroic, exotic adventure. When it was finally opened to “ordinary tourists” in 1955, Kathmandu became one of the world’s most fashionable trophy destinations.

Nepal’s Coming Out Party: Mahendra’s Coronation, 1956

Historically Nepal’s royal coronations were solemn rituals carried out in the privacy of Kathmandu’s old royal palace. But after his father’s death in March 1955, Mahendra decided to turn his official investiture into a public spectacle designed less to transform himself into a king than to assert Nepal’s status as a sovereign nation-state (especially vis-à-vis India). Having been admitted to the United Nations in 1955, Mahendra wanted to use his coronation to both signal Nepal’s arrival on the world stage and publically affirm Nepal’s allegiance to the new global ideological narratives of modernization, development, and democracy.

Mahendra eagerly embraced the new political economy of foreign aid and his coronation was to showcase Nepal’s development potential for would-be donors. Alongside the ritual proceedings “the coronation week was filled with the sort of activities which modern states are expected to provide on such occasions,” with the centerpiece being “a National Development Exhibition, which put on show present achievements and future hopes in industry, commerce, and the arts” (Forbes 1962:112; cf. Wood 1987:153). On display was Mahendra’s bid to claim the title of modernizing monarch and his declaration that Nepal was open for development business.

Big ambitions necessitated a big event and Nepal went all out. In addition to having the city cleaned and painted, there was a host of new building projects including a new national stadium where some of the coronation celebrations took place. The airport got a new terminal building to replace the rickety hut prone to blow over in the wake of aircraft engines. Built on land adjacent to the Pashupatinath Temple, the airport’s runway had been pastureland for sacred cows donated by pious Hindus. Incoming

planes had to buzz the runway before landing to scatter the cattle. Known previously as the Gaochar (literally, “cow pasture”) Airport, in 1955 it was renamed Tribhuvan Airport.

Much more impressive was the completion of the first motor road into the Kathmandu valley, a “development” gift of the Indian government though (troublingly) built by the Indian Army. Whereas the Ranas had made inaccessibility a matter of state security, after 1951 vehicular access to the capital became a state priority. Already in 1952 one witness describes watching seven bulldozers crest the pass into the valley, “the first vehicles ever to arrive in Katmandu under their own power” (Weir 1956:137). Another observer notes that the road was “ceremonially opened” in December 1953 only to be closed again because of landslides (Izzard 1955:86). By spring of 1956 the Tribhuvan Rajpath (“Royal Road”) was in good enough shape to drive “fifty brand-new taxis” over the “still-uncompleted highway from India” (*Newsweek* 1956:52).

In a major departure from Nepal’s traditional reluctance to allow foreigners into the country, over four hundred state guests attended the coronation. Even more surprising were the 160 foreign media correspondents who converged on Kathmandu representing news outlets from the *New York Times* to Radio Iceland (Peissel 1966:212). Also conspicuously present was Lowell Thomas, the famous American newsman and “travelogue king” who only a few years earlier had made his historic broadcasts from Lhasa. Driving in from Delhi, Thomas arrived with over twenty vehicles and a small army of crew to man his massive Cinerama¹⁶ cameras. In the weeks leading up to the main ceremony, the valley swarmed with jostling reporters looking for stories (Han 1973 [1958]:311). Idle photographers spread out across the city “fighting for photographs before bewildered Tibetans, shy Newar girls, and beautiful Tamang women” (Peissel 1966:212) who were among the estimated one million Nepalis who flocked to the celebration.

In fact press representatives were so invasive that they threatened to take over the city and the coronation itself. Witnesses describe shabbily dressed pressmen outnumbering the official guests in their top hats and tiaras. According to Desmond Doig (1994:29),

There was a staggering moment during the actual . . . crowning when the press stampeded onto the royal dais itself, shoving and nudging and breaking each other’s cameras as they went. Anglo-Saxon expletives resounded above the ceremonial chanting and the baying noise the press itself was making.

16. Specially designed for projection onto huge curved screens, “Cinerama” productions were the IMAX films of their day. Filming involved using three synchronized movie cameras.

Adding to the confusion, Lowell Thomas had set up his monstrous Cin-erama cameras right in front of the platform on which king, queen, and priests were stoically going about their ritual business. Thomas and his crew, perhaps accustomed to Hollywood film shoots, periodically shouted out commands such as “Here King! Here King—not so fast!” and “Hold it, King!” (Han 1973 [1958]:359). Doig notes that “a leading British newspaper gave front-page prominence to the Nepalese coronation by quoting the American intrusion—‘Hold it, King’—in a banner headline over a picture of the interrupted crowning” (1994:32).

Not surprisingly, the press were less taken by Mahendra’s carefully presented “Development Exhibitions” than by the sheer spectacle of the event: a combination of Victorian pomp and ceremony with inscrutable Eastern rituals and exotic local people, set before the backdrop of Kathmandu’s magnificent medieval architecture, blue sky, and white Himalayan peaks. With such exotic visions before them the last thing reporters were interested in were dry stories of Nepal’s hopes to build roads, schools, and factories. Mahendra’s coronation brought Nepal to the world’s attention in unprecedented ways but the image of Nepal that reached Western media consumers was what the West wanted to see (the exotic East), not what Mahendra had intended.¹⁷

Perhaps the best account of Mahendra’s coronation is in Han Suyin’s novel *The Mountain Is Young* (1958). By the time Han arrived in Kathmandu early in 1956 she was already famous. The child of a Belgian mother and a European-educated Chinese father, Han was a medical doctor in Hong Kong when she wrote her first novel, *A Many-Splendored Thing* (1952), a largely autobiographical story of a Eurasian doctor’s romance with a British officer. A huge success, the novel was quickly made into a Hollywood film which, in 1954, won a raft of Academy Awards and made Han’s name a household word. Following her first husband’s death in the Chinese Civil War, and separated from her second husband, in 1956 Han arrived in Kathmandu several months before the coronation staying at the Royal Hotel and soaking up the exotic atmosphere. While there she fell in love with Vincent Ruthnaswamy, an Indian Army colonel working on the road construction project, who soon became her third and lifelong husband. *The Mountain Is Young* is another thinly disguised autobiography describ-

17. It’s notable that Mahendra saw the coronation as having nothing to do with tourism. The government had no tourism-related promotions and prepared no literature for tourists. Nevertheless, one enterprising Nepali *did* self-publish what is probably the first guidebook to Nepal. Chandra Bahadur Shrestha specifically issued his *Katmandu Guide* (1956) in conjunction with the coronation with the aim of promoting Kathmandu as a tourist destination (Shrestha 1956:I-II). Interestingly, Shrestha understands Kathmandu’s tourism potential in the context of British colonial “hill stations” (1956:2) that had probably been the first Western tourism destinations in South Asia (Kennedy 1996).

ing the giddy romance between a European reporter and an Indian Army engineer set against the backdrop of the Kathmandu valley social scene and the frenetic preparations for the coronation.

Beyond the two lovers, one of the novel's main characters is "Vassili"—the eccentric Russian proprietor of the Royal Hotel and clearly modeled on Boris. As Han recounts, Mahendra requested that Boris take the lead in hosting the coronation. Not only did he run the city's only (more or less) world-class hotel but, as former manager of the famous Calcutta 300 Club, Boris was the only person in Nepal with the experience and connections necessary to pull off a large-scale formal state affair.

How would Nepal house and feed hundreds of foreign guests accustomed to luxurious living? At least three new hotels opened for the event (Chand 2000:53) but none of them were suitable for dignitaries. For that Boris supervised renovations at five Rana palaces, several state guest houses, and a number of new rooms at the Royal, a process that involved, among other things, air-lifting in twenty-seven complete modern bathroom sets at huge expense (Han 1973 [1958]:93; Simpson 1976 [1967]: 65; Peissel 1966:209). Even more daunting was the prospect of providing gourmet food services for hundreds of people in a city with little electricity and less refrigeration. Sparing no expense, Boris had three DC-3 aircraft flying nonstop shuttles between Patna and Kathmandu for three days in order to bring in more than ten thousand live chickens, ducks, turkeys, guinea fowl, and geese, plus a ton and a half of fish, two tons of vegetables, and several tons of ice. Drawing on his Calcutta connections, Boris flew in fifty-seven cooks and 150 trained table staff. From London came dozens of place settings of fine china, silver, and crystal (Peissel 1966:210–11). Photos in *Life* magazine show Boris hovering fretfully over the proceedings (*Life* 1956) and at least one account describes him as having a well-deserved "nervous breakdown" after the coronation (Eskelund 1960:103). *Time* magazine called Mahendra's coronation "the subcontinent's party of the year" (*Time* 1956:38).

Mahendra's coronation was a success in ways both intended and otherwise. On the diplomatic front, Nepal had invited the world to a solemn state function and the principal powers had acknowledged Nepal's sovereign standing. But it was the world media's attention that no Nepalis had predicted. The media turned Mahendra's coronation into a vast spectacle proclaiming Kathmandu's antique and Oriental charms to an audience predisposed to dreams of Shangri-La and eager to imagine that such a place still existed in some remote corner of the Himalayas.

Mountains, Monsters, and Monks: Nepal in the 1950s Western Popular Imagination

The 1950s saw more Western media coverage of Nepal than any decade before or since. Much of it was political reporting tied to concerns over Nepal's fate during the Cold War against Communism. There were also bursts of coverage surrounding Nepal's first tourists and King Mahendra's coronation. But the other major media focus was on Himalayan mountaineering. With Tibetan approaches now closed (because of the Chinese invasion) and Nepal now open to the world, Himalayan mountaineering underwent a decade of explosive growth as teams from around the world competed to summit the world's tallest mountains, most of which lie in Nepal.¹

Rather than document the history of Himalayan mountaineering,² this chapter considers how dozens of high-profile expeditions focused the world's attention on the Himalayas such that Nepal became synonymous with high-altitude adventure. For those coming of age in the

1. Of the world's fourteen mountains over eight thousand meters (ca. 26,000 feet), all are in the Himalayas and eight are in Nepal. They are Everest, Kanchenjunga (third-highest), Lhotse (fourth), Makalu (fifth), Cho-oyu (sixth), Dhaulagiri (seventh), Manaslu (eighth), and Annapurna (tenth).

2. There are many good histories of Himalayan mountaineering, including Ortner 1999 and Isserman and Weaver 2008.

1950s Nepal's earlier standing as a mystical, forbidden land was overlaid with a new reputation for *adventure*. Mountaineering helped lure tourists to Kathmandu but also planted the seeds of trekking tourism, a form of adventure travel that became widely popular in following decades (see chapter 11).

Mountaineering, Oriental exoticization, and Cold War anxieties also led some of the 1950s' more bizarre popular culture excesses to be located in the Nepal Himalayas. In a decade known for its fixation on monsters, UFOs, and paranormal phenomena of all sorts, one of the most colorful characters was the yeti, or "abominable snowman." Reported since the 1920s, it wasn't until the 1950s that yeti mania struck hard, sending numerous high-profile expeditions into the high country. Though yeti hunters turned up empty-handed, yetis soon began showing up in popular films—as both villains and heroes—often making appearances alongside aliens, spies, Chinese Communists, and other frightening creatures that haunted the West's imagination in the 1950s.

The Allure of Everest: Mountaineering and Media Coverage

Because Nepal had been effectively closed before 1951, almost all of the previous attempts on peaks in the Nepal Himalayas had occurred via northern approaches, through Tibet. (With the border between Tibet and Nepal undefined, it was never even clear to which country certain mountains, including Everest, belonged.³) After 1951 this scenario changed completely with Nepal hosting most Himalayan expeditions, and Kathmandu serving as the principal gateway. Between 1950 and 1965 expeditions summited all the major peaks in Nepal. Almost all media accounts during this "golden age of Himalayan mountaineering" (Beedie 2003:216) were bylined "Kathmandu," indelibly linking the city's name with high adventure during an era when mountaineering received far more media attention than ever before or since (McDonald 2005:108).

Of course the ultimate mountaineering goal was Mt. Everest. Known to Nepalis as Sagarmatha (Sky Head) and to Tibetans as Chomolungma (Earth Mother), to mountaineers Everest is simply the earth's "third pole." As the highest point on earth, it has become "a powerful symbol of ultimate goals" (Bernbaum 1997:236). Mt. Everest represents an extreme that, in the modern Western imagination, inspires less reverence or awe than

3. Only in 1960 did Nepal and China agree to place the border directly across the summit of Everest (Mihaly 2002 [1965]:126).

desire: the desire to climb, be near, or even just *see* the earth's greatest extremity (Macfarlane 2003).

With the establishment of the modern Nepali state in 1951, Western mountaineers at last had access to Everest from the Nepal side. Already that year the British sent climber Eric Shipton to reconnoiter the southern approaches to Everest. In 1952 the Swiss pioneered the now standard approach to the summit and managed to put a team within three hundred meters of the top. Like every other Himalayan expedition, the Swiss team included Nepali Sherpas, residents of the high valleys leading to Everest on the Nepal side.

One of these Sherpas was Tenzing Norgay (1914?–1986) who, though born in the Everest region, moved to Indian Darjeeling as a teenager in search of work. There he joined the two 1930s British Everest expeditions, working as a high-altitude porter. Tenzing's first Everest summit attempt was in 1947 with rogue Canadian climber Earl Denman in an unauthorized ultra-light climb from the Tibetan side. (They were stopped by storms just short of the North Col.) Then in 1952 he was part of the almost-successful Swiss summit party.

This meant that Tenzing was by far the most experienced high-altitude climber on the famous 1953 British expedition. Tenzing and New Zealander Edmund Hillary managed to scale a forty-meter rock wall (the "Hillary Step" that had turned back the Swiss) beyond which was a relatively easy walk to the summit on May 29, 1953. London *Times* correspondent James/Jan Morris managed to scoop colleagues by getting news of the achievement back to Britain on the eve of Queen Elizabeth's coronation, making that event even more memorable (James Morris 1958; Jan Morris 1974).⁴ In South Asia controversy over Tenzing's national identity marred the event. Because he had spent much of his adult life in Darjeeling, India claimed Tenzing. But Nepali nationalists too were eager to embrace Tenzing. Eventually Nepal won the contest, claiming Tenzing—and the Sherpa "brand"—as their own, and firmly linking Nepal, Sherpa, and adventure in the minds of millions of (potential) tourists (Ortner 1999).

In the next three years mountaineers bagged nine more eight-thousand-meter peaks (most of them in Nepal) (Satyal 1999:83) and by 1970 the Nepal government had registered over five hundred official climbing expeditions (Satyal 2000:185–87). One of the most widely covered was the 1963 US Everest expedition, a successful bid that pioneered a new summit route via the West Ridge (McDonald 2005:93). Back in the US the 1963 expe-

4. Born James Morris, Jan Morris began sex reassignment procedures during the 1960s. Morris 1958 describes the 1953 Everest expedition while Morris 1974 revisits that event (and others) from a female perspective.

dition “gained enormous media attention” (Rogers 2007:41) initially by journalists and later in publications by the climbers themselves. The fact that summiteer Barry Bishop was a *National Geographic* editor guaranteed heavy coverage of Everest and Nepal in that magazine before and after the climb.

The 1963 US effort was one of the last “siege-style expeditions” (McDonald 2005:153) characterized by vast logistical campaigns.⁵ The Americans hired thirty-two Sherpas and 909 porters to carry twenty-nine tons of gear from Kathmandu to Everest Base Camp and from there to a series of elaborate advance camps all the way to the summit (Ortner 1999:163). Like previous huge expeditions, the goal was to summit with the “victory” going to the national team (and the nation’s glory), not the individual climber(s).

With fewer and fewer high-status unclimbed summits remaining, siege-style climbing gradually gave way to new techniques that were more demanding but less costly. In 1970 Chris Bonington climbed Annapurna not by the traditional ridge route, but by blazing a much more difficult and dangerous trail directly up one of the peak’s vast ice faces. Traveling light and moving fast, Bonington’s technique represented a “fundamental shift” in mountaineering (McDonald 2005:114). By the late 1970s this “alpine style” climbing had become the norm leading ultimately to Italian Reinhold Messner and Austrian Peter Habeler’s controversial ultra-light ascent of Everest without supplemental oxygen in the 1978.⁶

One result of this alpine-style, even solo, climbing trend was that the focus of mountaineering shifted from national to individual accomplishment. Whereas the early siege-style conquests had been nationalist dramas fueled by national media, by the 1970s mountaineering was more about subtle technical feats, extreme athleticism, and star climbers. Even as the pace of Himalayan mountaineering accelerated, mainstream media reporting declined, replaced by niche-market coverage in mountaineering magazines and books. But 1950 to 1965 had been the “golden age” of

5. W. E. Bowman’s *The Ascent of Rum Doodle* (1956) parodies this massive expedition-style climb describing a fictitious assault on a forty-thousand-foot Himalayan peak in which “Yogistani” porters (modeled on Sherpas) end up effortlessly doing all the work, including carrying the bumbling sahibs to the summit, in return for wages.

6. Many mountaineers initially refused to believe it possible to summit Everest without bottled oxygen (McDonald 2005:132). By chance I happened to be in Delhi in June 1978, a few weeks after the climb, and met Tenzing Norgay in the lobby of the YWCA hostel where my family was staying. I asked Tenzing’s opinion of Messner’s claim to which he replied unequivocally that it was a hoax involving hidden oxygen bottles. Two years later Messner was the first person to summit Everest solo, unassisted, and without oxygen (McDonald 2005:140). In 1985 he became the first person to climb all fourteen of the world’s eight-thousand-meter peaks, all without supplemental oxygen (McDonald 2005:152).

mountaineering for Nepal, allowing it to bask in the light of global media publicity documenting national expeditions.

The Birth of “Trekking”

With so much media attention focused on Himalayan mountaineering it was inevitable that even people who weren’t up for *real* adventure (of the life-threatening sort) would want to get close enough to the action “to see adventurous places” (H. P. Shrestha 2000:186). Trekking emerged as an adventure tourism echo as more and more people visited high-Himalayan landscapes to vicariously experience something of the thrill of real mountaineering.

Most tourism officials in Nepal credit Col. Jimmy Roberts both with establishing Mountain Travel (the first trekking agency in Nepal—and the world) in 1964 and with essentially inventing trekking tourism in the process. One Kathmandu-based tourism consultant told me that Roberts created trekking in Nepal and established the principle trekking routes making Nepal’s experience “directly opposite” that of many other tourism destinations where products were “discovered by backpackers” and then developed by service providers. By this argument, trekking in Nepal begins with Mountain Travel’s first organized trekking party that set off from Kathmandu in 1965.

Yet the evidence strongly suggests otherwise. Despite Roberts’s important contributions, one finds numerous instances of foreigners “trekking” in Nepal almost from the moment the country opened in 1951—even if against government wishes. For example, Swiss adventurer Ella Maillart’s 1955 book *In the Land of the Sherpas* documents her trek into the Helambu region north of the Kathmandu Valley. Curiously, Maillart mentions having been granted permission to visit Helambu and her *text* describes *only* her travels there. But included in the book are many *photographs* of the Khumbu Valley, the famous Sherpa region hundreds of kilometers north-east along the approach route to Mt. Everest. Her travels illustrate how early tourists were intent on getting into regions that were already famous but still off-limits to non-mountaineers.⁷

In fact most Westerners in Kathmandu during the 1950s and early 1960s were interested in trekking. Sometimes referred to as the “first trekker,” Swiss geographer Toni Hagen (hired to survey and map the country)

7. Similarly, Tom Weir’s 1956 *East of Kathmandu* ostensibly documents a government-approved ornithological survey of Eastern Nepal from the early 1950s but reads like a trekking travelogue describing the scenery, trails, and people he encountered.

wandered Nepal on foot for a decade and in 1960 published an influential article in *National Geographic* entitled “Afoot in Roadless Nepal” that was essentially an advertisement for trekking (Hagen 1960). American diplomats and development personnel stationed in Kathmandu talk about trekking holidays in the 1950s (Clarridge 1997:57, Wood 1987:83). In 1955 German Buddhist monk Sugata (Karl Heinz Wagner) trekked to the Everest region (Sugata and Kellet 2004) and the following year a number of foreigners attending Mahendra’s coronation also went trekking. One of these, Duncan Forbes, mentions being directed to “the Corporal of Porters in his little office in old Kathmandu” to hire porters and a Sherpa guide (1962:119). Notably foreigners used the established portering system a decade before the first “trekking agency” appeared.

By the mid-1950s—at the height of the Cold War—many in Kathmandu suspected ulterior motives of people fascinated with Nepal’s northern borderlands. Americans in particular were “forever asking for permits to go ‘trekking’ up there” (Han 1973 [1958]:249). Nepal’s northern neighbors shared the distrust. During a state visit to Nepal in January 1957 Chinese Premier Zhou En-lai voiced the same suspicion, accusing mountaineers and trekkers of trying to penetrate Tibet (Mihaly 1965:69).

When Karl Eskelund decided to go trekking soon after the Premier’s visit, he had a lot more problems than had Forbes a year earlier. Now Nepal’s Foreign Ministry had to grant permission (1960:107). His application denied, Eskelund decided to go anyway. Dressed in Nepali clothing and dark glasses, and accompanied by a Nepali friend, Eskelund hiked north only to be stopped by an officer at the first police post. “He knew that foreigners were not supposed to go into the mountains without special permission, but he was a reasonable man. A small present for him, some cigarettes for the soldiers,” and on they went (1960:108). One suspects that, like this officer, the government itself was probably less uptight about foreigners-gone-trekking than they had to officially profess.

Exactly where official policy on trekking had gone by 1959 is unclear but a guidebook published that year—the first extensive tourist guidebook to Nepal⁸—prominently features “trekking” among Nepal’s tourist attractions. J. H. Elliott’s *Guide to Nepal* boasts that “Nepal affords the outdoor man several attractive opportunities to discover the Forbidden Land, with treks to some of the finest hills and valleys, covered with virgin forests and interesting people, fauna and flora, camping sites in rich green valleys

8. The very first Nepal guide book that I am aware of is Chandra Bahadur Shrestha’s 1956 *Katmandu Guide*. Although written for tourists, Shrestha’s *Guide* seems to have a limited grasp of what exactly tourists might be interested in, including in its pages lists of power plants and fire brigades along with hotels and sites to be seen.

within view of the mighty snows” (1959:105). Given that Elliott’s book had formal government authorization (1959:iiiv)—and an official dedication by Mahendra himself—suggests that Nepal at least tacitly encouraged trekking tourism.

Briton John Morris went trekking in 1960 but only after two weeks of making a daily nuisance of himself at the Foreign Ministry (1963:57).⁹ In search of porters, Morris approached the recently organized “Himalayan Society,” a trade organization for Sherpas, but learned that they dealt only with expeditions, not individual trekkers.¹⁰ Finally Morris contacted Jimmy Roberts, then Military Attaché in the British Embassy, who introduced him to a suitable Sherpa guide (1963:61, cf. Hutchison 1989:23). After a stop at a Kathmandu shop specializing in imported tinned goods, Morris finally set off on his trek.

That same year (1960) the German monk Sugata (who had trekked to the Everest region in 1955) set off again, this time up the Kali Gandaki River valley north of Pokhara at the invitation of Shamsheer Man Sherchan, the cosmopolitan son of a local Thakali family that had grown wealthy from the Tibetan salt trade. But with trade routes shut (because of the Chinese invasion), by the late 1950s Sherchan’s thoughts turned to trekking as a way of attracting new business to his home district. He invited Sugata—by then a popular public speaker in Europe—to publicize the so-called “Devil Dances” held annually at the Buddhist Kyupar Monastery. Sherchan was a visionary who saw “a potential new imprint on the old salt route: tourism” and helped turn the Annapurna region into one of Nepal’s premier trekking destinations (Sugata and Kellett 2004:353).

The first group of American Peace Corps volunteers (PCVs) arrived in Nepal in 1962 (Fisher 2013) and quickly made their mark on the nascent trekking scene. Foreshadowing the youth trekking boom of the 1970s and 1980s, PCVs pioneered what later became popular trekking routes. Don Messerschmidt and other PCV buddies huddled over maps in preparation for vacations when they would head deep into the mountains (1966:7). Some got into trouble, as when four PCVs trekked into Mustang, the off-limits base for CIA-backed Khampa guerillas fighting in Tibet. Others, like Messerschmidt and friends, were some of the first foreigners to visit the Marsyangdi Valley north of the Annapurna massif, pioneering (in 1964)

9. By the time American development advisor Frederick Selby went trekking in 1961, no trekking permits were required (2008:142).

10. Satyal (2000:189) calls the Himalayan Society “the first trekking agency established to look after trekking business [that] handled trekkers in an organized way.” He also claims that the organization was founded in the late 1940s. Ortner (1999:156) contradicts both of these claims, describing the Himalayan Society as a professional organization designed to protect Sherpa interests on large-scale mountaineering expeditions, not a trekking agency for tourists.

the now hugely popular Annapurna Circuit and publishing an account of their trek in *Summit* (Messerschmidt 1966).

This brings us to 1964, the year Jimmy Roberts established Mountain Travel, Nepal's first trekking agency and, by some accounts, invented trekking tourism. Some people I interviewed even credited Roberts with having coined the term "trekking," or at least introducing it to Nepal.¹¹ But clearly "trekking" tourism was well underway by 1964 and needed no inventing. Rather, Roberts had the vision to turn a set of emerging practices into a business.

James Owen Merion Roberts (1916–97) was born in India, the son of a British civil servant in Gujarat. After attending the Royal Military College at Sandhurst, in 1938 he joined the British Indian Army where he served with a Nepali Gurkha regiment while spending every spare moment climbing in the Indian Himalayas. In 1940 he was invited to join a British Everest expedition. Its cancellation, because of the war, was one of his life's major disappointments (Roberts n.d.a.).¹² After the war, Roberts joined the (unsuccessful) British attempt on Annapurna in 1950. Not chosen for the (successful) 1953 British Everest expedition, Roberts served as part of its logistical support team. In 1958 Roberts eagerly accepted the newly created post of Military Attaché in the Kathmandu British Embassy—mainly to stay close to the exciting Himalayan mountaineering scene. In 1963 he retired from the military to serve as "transportation officer" for the massive American Everest Expedition, coordinating nine hundred porters carrying mountains of equipment over five hundred kilometers from Kathmandu to Everest Base Camp.

With the American campaign behind him, retired and living on a comfortable army pension, Roberts's thoughts turned to tourism as a way of keeping himself productively occupied in Nepal, a country he knew well and greatly enjoyed. While attaché at the embassy, Roberts was already helping tourists organize informal treks. Recalling boyhood holidays in Kashmir, Roberts had fond memories of portered hunting trips where outfitters provided "tented camps" to vacationers for a fee (cf. Booth 1991:181). But the modern logistician also remembered the cumbersome,

11. "Trek" comes from the Dutch *trekken* (to travel) and probably entered the English language via Dutch settlers in South Africa (Shrestha 2000:136). The British brought the word to South Asia where it was commonly used by outdoorsmen in association with recreational outings into the mountains and jungles of India. With their piles of gear and armies of porters, these ventures probably did look like small versions of the epic Dutch "treks" that followed the British occupation of the Cape Colony in the early nineteenth century.

12. The unpublished, undated manuscript cited here ("1964: How It All Began") was probably written in the 1970s. After his death in 1997, a slightly modified version of the same essay was circulated (also unpublished) with the title "The Himalayan Odyssey" (Roberts n.d.b).

inefficient old practices involving troops of porters lugging huge tents, furniture, and china hither and yon. Plus, unlike Raj-era clients, modern trekkers didn't know local languages or how to manage porters. Roberts decided that Mountain Travel's trekking services would start with "lessons learned in expeditionary mountaineering" but add high-level client services and staff training (Roberts n.d.a.).

In 1964 Roberts placed a "small but expensive" advertisement in *Holiday* magazine, which had already published four articles promoting tourism in Nepal, including one by Han Suyin (1957). By 1965 Mountain Travel had its first trekkers: three American women—with ages between fifty-six and sixty-four, some referred to them as "grandmothers"—who Roberts guided all the way to the Khumbu region below Everest, and back (Bernstein 1970:13). The almost five-hundred-kilometer (ca. three-hundred-mile) trek took thirty days and cost five hundred dollars per person (McDonald 2005:99). Said Roberts, "In fact two were unmarried so were unlikely to be grandmothers, and a more sporting trio of enthusiastic and appreciative ladies I have never since handled" (n.d.a.).

At five hundred dollars a head (not including transportation to/from Nepal) Mountain Travel's Everest trek was *very* expensive and targeted the kind of tourist that still dominated the international market in the early 1960s—wealthy, older, mainly American. But Mountain Travel's high rates also provided a high-end product. A streamlined version of the colonial "tented camp," trekkers enjoyed separate sleeping and mess tents, tables and table cloths, chairs, dishes and cutlery, and a toilet tent with sit-down comfort. Trekkers awoke to a cup of hot tea and a bowl of hot water for bathing delivered to their tents. While clients enjoyed a hearty breakfast, staff broke camp and sent cooks ahead to prepare elaborate trailside lunches. By midafternoon clients (carrying nothing more than a water bottle and a pair of binoculars) would wander into their already assembled camp, have hot water for bathing, and enjoy a three-course dinner: soup, entrée, and dessert.¹³

Roberts registered his "trekking agency" with Nepal's Department of Tourism in 1964, the same year Nepal issued the first formal "trekking permits" (Satyal 2000:192). Mountain Travel provided permits for its clients but DIY trekkers were on their own. Irish travel writer Dervla Murphy describes the necessity of making herself a "Public Nuisance" in order to wrench trekking permits from the clutches of truculent bureaucrats (1967:163). Part of Murphy's problem was the fact that, shortly before her

13. If this sounds familiar to anyone who has since trekked in Nepal it's because the Mountain Travel model was copied (more or less) by virtually every trekking company that followed. To this day Nepal's trekking "product" bears the indelible stamp of Jimmy Robert's vision of what a trek should be.

arrival, two other Europeans had abused their “trekking” privileges crossing illegally into Tibet where they filmed CIA-backed Tibetan commandos attacking Chinese troops.¹⁴ In search of a Sherpa guide and porter, Murphy visited the Globe Restaurant (a Tibetan-run business in the old city) that served as an informal meeting ground for budget trekkers and porters looking for work (1967:162). Even while Mountain Travel claimed the market’s high end, shoestring trekkers and Nepalis were shaping the low end.

Mountain Travel’s launch timing was fortuitous in that the company could employ Sherpas and other mountaineers suddenly out of work, owing to a climbing ban imposed in 1965. Since the early 1950s China had pressured Nepal to limit or ban access to Himalayan peaks for fear of Western spying (*Time* 1952). The 1963 US Everest Expedition, though also a legitimate climbing enterprise, was widely reputed to include CIA personnel (Selby 2008:178) including summiteer and *National Geographic* editor Barry Bishop (Jose 2010). In 1964 the Chinese stunned the world by detonating nuclear devices (in Tibet) that were thought to be years from completion, further ratcheting up US spy efforts. Nepal finally folded to Chinese pressure in 1965 instituting what became a four-year ban on high-Himalayan climbing (Holden 1966, McDonald 2005:98) and forcing Americans to move their Himalayan spying efforts elsewhere.¹⁵ Though disastrous for mountaineering, the 1965–69 ban boosted the nascent trekking industry, bringing more Nepali providers into the market and driving costs down within reach of younger, middle-class travelers.

The climbing ban also allowed Mountain Travel to hire famous mountaineers as guides. Eric Shipton (leader of the 1935 British Everest expedition) and Lute Jerstad (American Everest summiteer in 1963) both worked as trekking guides during the late 1960s. Roberts also hired Don Messerschmidt, former Peace Corps volunteer and intrepid trekker, to lead treks to Everest Base Camp and Jomsom in 1968. Messerschmidt went on to publish more trekking articles in *Summit* magazine (1967, 1968). His 1968 “How to Trek in Nepal” caught the attention of American hiker Stephen Bezruchka, inspired him to go trekking in Nepal in 1969, and eventually publish the first substantial Nepal trekking guide (Bezruchka 1972).¹⁶ Bez-

14. Michel Peissel describes this incident in his 1973 book *The Secret War in Tibet*.

15. The US immediately began a series of ill-fated attempts to place remote sensing devices on Himalayan peaks along the Indian border. The tragic result was the loss of a nuclear-powered device, containing five pounds of plutonium, swept away in an avalanche during an American/Indian “mountaineering” expedition in 1965 (Kohli and Conboy 2003, Takeda 2007). The plutonium was never recovered. When its container someday splits open, it will contaminate much of north India’s water supply (Jose 2010).

16. Initially published in Kathmandu in 1972, Bezruchka’s guide went through three editions before moving to The Mountaineers press of Seattle. As of 2014 the book was in its eighth edition.

ruchka's *Guide to Trekking in Nepal* was aimed squarely at the young, low-budget travelers that had come to dominate the tourism scene by the early 1970s (see chapter 11).

Yeti Mania

Today it's hard to understand the West's obsession with the Himalayan yeti during the 1950s. Practically every year between 1953 and 1960 numerous major expeditions set out from Kathmandu in search of the Abominable Snowman. Then, as now, many thought the whole matter a myth at best and a hoax at worst. Of the 1950s yeti hunters, one old Kathmandu expat recalled that "no one in Kathmandu took them seriously." Big-budget yeti expeditions were welcome sources of money and employment for Kathmandu businesses and Sherpas, but they were also the butt of jokes at the Royal Hotel's Yak & Yeti bar. Still, foreigners spent incredible amounts of time and money hunting for yetis.

The yeti has a strange and complicated pedigree in the Western imagination. Yeti mania was only the latest instance of Himalayan exoticization that had been ongoing for centuries. People imagined the Himalayas to be the last holdout of things lost in the "civilized" Western world: spirituality, esoteric wisdom, uncorrupted lifestyles—and yetis (Bishop 1989). By the 1930s yetis represented one of the *last unknowns* which, by definition, had to reside in the *most unknown* farthest reaches of the world—the Himalayan "third pole." Apart from some Sherpas, Nepalis neither knew nor cared about yetis, but Westerners deeply desired their existence.

Mixed with this mystical, vaguely antimodernist longing, the yeti craze also had a curiously modern, scientific tone. In the 1950s the prospect of finding "unknown," even semi-mythical animals, was much less far-fetched than it might now seem. Numerous animals known only as fossils or myths had been recently "discovered" by science (giant pandas, okapis, coelacanths, etc.), so why not yetis? A whole branch of quasi-science known as "cryptozoology" arose premised on the belief that just because we don't know about it doesn't mean it doesn't exist. Also working in the yeti's favor were still persistent notions of the "missing link" between man and apes that had gripped the Western popular imagination ever since Darwin's pronouncements. Hominid fossil discoveries (*Australopithecus*, *Gigantopithecus*, etc.) helped lend credence to the idea that some ape-man might still roam the earth. Even as late as the 1960s, distinguished Ivy League anthropology professor Carleton Coon included a chapter called "Of Giant Apes and Snowmen" in his

popular text book *The Story of Man* (1962:27–28).¹⁷ Coon believed that all it would take to prove the Snowman’s existence was systematic, scientific (re)search.

Tales of *yeh-teh* and *meh-teh* (Tibetan for “snow-man” and “bear-man”) circulated among Sherpas and other high-altitude peoples long before Brian Houghton Hodgson—Indologist, naturalist, and British Resident in Kathmandu—first brought the yeti to Western attention in 1832 (Hodgson 1832). Through the nineteenth century European mountaineers periodically reported yeti tracks but it wasn’t until the early twentieth century, and especially the British Everest expeditions of the 1920s and 1930s, that “the yeti story began deeply to affect the Western imagination” (Bishop 1989:237). British Everest mountaineer Bill Tilman’s book *Mount Everest, 1938* includes an entire appendix cataloging his and others’ sightings of yeti tracks (Tilman 1948). But it was British Everest climber Eric Shipton’s 1951 yeti track photos that really riveted the world’s attention. When members of the 1952 Swiss Everest expedition reported actual yeti sightings (Izzard 1955:30), public interest reached a high point, just on the eve of the historic British Everest climb of May 1953. With so many respected heroes openly professing the yeti’s existence, it’s easy to see why so many others were willing to entertain the possibility.

After covering the 1953 expedition for the London *Daily Mail* (Izzard 1954), journalist Ralph Izzard convinced his bosses that yetis and yeti hunting would sell newspapers. On December 3, 1953, Izzard launched the “Daily Mail Expedition” with a front-page announcement that included biographies of scientific participants and interviews with Everest mountaineering legends such as Sir John Hunt and Eric Shipton who gave their blessings to the endeavor (Izzard 1955:66, Stonor 1955). The crew spent about four months scouring the Khumbu/Everest region before returning to Europe. Izzard’s expedition didn’t find any yetis but it did score a huge publicity coup for the *Daily Mail* and managed to thrust the yeti phenomenon—and Nepal—into the public eye in an unprecedented manner.

One of those enthralled by Izzard’s reports was Tom Slick, an aptly named jet-setting American millionaire and philanthropist with a powerful obsession for cryptozoology. Thomas Baker Slick Jr. (1916–62) was heir to a Texas oil fortune and used his money to fund projects ranging from scien-

17. Coon treats reports of yeti sightings and tracks very matter-of-factly with the implication that it is only a matter of time before they will be known to science. He includes an illustration (p. 27) showing three hominid footprints side by side: Neanderthal, Cro-Magnon, and “Abominable Snowman” (the later based on the famous photo by Eric Shipton taken on Everest in 1951). As late as 1984 Coon published an essay entitled “Why There Has to Be a Sasquatch” (Coon 1984).

tific research¹⁸ and efforts to promote world peace, to “mind science” and cryptozoology (Coleman 1989, 2002). Slick’s yeti fixation was further encouraged by the publication (in 1955) of Belgian cryptozoologist Bernard Heuvelmans’s book *Sur la piste des bêtes ignorées (On the Track of Unknown Animals)* that included a chapter on yetis.¹⁹ Having recruited Heuvelmans as advisor, by spring 1956 Slick was already in Kathmandu collecting information on yeti sightings (Coleman 1989:53).²⁰ Encouraged by what he found, Slick decided to launch his own large-scale yeti hunt. Twenty years earlier Texas oil millionaire William H. Harkness (of Standard Oil) had led an expedition to Tibet to find the mythical giant panda, returning with the first live specimen in 1936. Now some of the same personnel from Harkness’s expedition joined Slick’s search for the yeti (Coleman 1989:19). Slick was convinced that the scientific search that had proven the panda’s existence would do the same for the yeti.

By spring 1957 Slick had assembled a team of yeti hunters and advisors and had permission from the Nepal government to launch the “Slick Yeti Reconnaissance.” Lending scientific credibility to the expedition, one of its official members was Carleton Coon, the University of Pennsylvania anthropology professor who remained optimistic about finding a living “missing link.” But the most important team member was Irishman Peter Byrne, a former tea planter, explorer, and big-game hunter (see chapter 5). Focused on the upper Arun River Valley east of Mt. Everest, the team (including Slick) spent several months bushwhacking through rhododendron forests and scouring snowfields in search of yeti tracks—which they report having found in several places.

In 1958 Slick hired Peter Byrne, his brother Bryan Byrne, and several other prominent Westerners including Norman Dyhrenfurth, a member of the almost-successful 1952 Swiss Everest expedition, and Gerald Russell who, decades earlier, had been the first person to capture a live giant panda. This group searched through two spring climbing seasons but the Byrne brothers stayed in the field almost continually from 1957 to 1959. When they returned to Kathmandu at Christmas in 1959, the Byrnes had a cable from Slick directing them to abandon the yeti search and come to

18. Slick’s Southwest Research Center remains one of the largest nonprofit scientific research institutions in the US. See SWR.com and Txbiomed.org.

19. An English edition followed in 1958 and in 1972 MIT Press published an updated version of the book!

20. Slick makes an unnamed appearance in Han Suyin’s fictional account of Mahendra’s 1956 coronation. She describes “a Texan expedition, led by a bona fide Texan in oil, to look for the Abominable Snowman, complete with an entourage which included a publicity agent who wore a mink coat and high-heeled shoes” (Han 1958:204). Slick’s glamorous companion was Cathy Maclean who is listed as a “liaison officer” in some Slick expedition records (Coleman 2002:83).

northern California to hunt a newly reported hairy hominid, “Bigfoot” (Coleman 1989:93).²¹

Just as amazing as the expeditions themselves is the phenomenal amount of coverage they received in Western media. It is one thing to imagine Slick and his colleagues as lonely crackpots nobody cared about, but another to realize that their exploits were being eagerly reported in high-profile news outlets back home. Between 1956 and 1958 the *New York Times* ran four articles on Slick’s expeditions and *Newsweek* magazine had two features. In 1958 alone the *Los Angeles Times* printed four articles on the snowman hunt.²² Slick corresponded with *Life* and the magazine reportedly offered him one million dollars for a conclusive photograph of a yeti (Coleman 1989:67). Of course not all media coverage was uncritical: a 1958 *Sports Illustrated* article on Slick’s yeti-hunting exploits dismisses the whole affair as a joke.²³ Joke or not, yeti hunting kept Nepal and the myth of the mysterious Himalayas squarely in the Western public’s view for much of the 1950s.²⁴

Yeti mania reached a crescendo in 1959 and 1960 with eleven expeditions, including Japanese, French, and even Chinese searching for yetis across the Himalayas (Coleman 2002:201; Peter Byrne, personal communication).²⁵ But the last high-profile yeti hunt came in 1960 when Chicago’s Field Museum and World Book Encyclopedia sponsored the “World Book 1960 Scientific Expedition to the Himalayas” which included Edmund Hillary and pioneering wildlife filmmaker Marlin Perkins. Among its objectives the expedition listed the search for the Abominable

21. For much more detail see Coleman 2002 and Byrne 1975.

22. The bibliography of Coleman 1989 provides an amazing list of references to journalistic coverage of the Slick expeditions.

23. See the “Events and Discoveries” column in *Sports Illustrated* July 14, 1958.

24. As if Tom Slick’s story wasn’t strange enough, there are also rumors that he was a spy and that cryptozoology was cover for anticommunist espionage. Already on April 27, 1957, the *New York Times* published an article entitled “Soviet Sees Espionage in U.S. Snowman Hunt” that questions Slick’s motives. In fact there is intriguing circumstantial evidence sufficient to make one wonder whether—just maybe—Slick was, in fact, a spook. The most elaborate presentation of this thesis is an essay by Loren Coleman appended to his 2002 Slick biography. In it Coleman points out that some of Slick’s businesses seem to have had CIA connections and an amazing number of Slick’s snowman team recruits had backgrounds in covert operations. Even anthropologist Carleton Coon worked with the Office of Strategic Services (the proto-CIA) during World War II (Coon 1981). Also intriguing is Coleman’s insinuation of a link between the Dalai Lama’s escape from Tibet to India in March 1959 (an event reputed to have occurred with CIA assistance), and Peter Byrne’s forays into the deep backcountry of Nepal in search of yetis—a search that ended abruptly shortly after the Dalai Lama’s flight (2002:197). In personal communications, Byrne flatly denies any involvement and politely accuses Coleman of being crazy. But who knows what mysteries will be solved if the CIA’s Himalayan X-files are ever released! Regardless, this intrigue only adds to the mystique of Tom Slick, who died (mysteriously?) in a plane wreck in 1962.

25. Wood (1987:288) and Eskelund (1960:95) also mention yeti-hunting expeditions frequently departing from Kathmandu in the late 1950s.

Snowman—though Hillary conceded this was driven more by “public relations” than serious intent (Coleman 1989:94). Yeti enthusiast and Tom Slick biographer Loren Coleman accuses Hillary of “assassinating” the yeti by carrying out a “publicity stunt” designed to “destroy the belief in the yeti held by so many following the Slick-era searches” (1989:96). Either way, the World Book Expedition netted Nepal another round of global news coverage that wrapped up in 1961 with an article by Hillary in *Life* (then the world’s leading circulation magazine) aptly titled “Epitaph to the Elusive Abominable Snowman” (Hillary 1961). (Articles in *National Geographic* and an episode of Perkin’s TV show “Wild Kingdom” further discredited the yeti myth.) Hillary’s yeti assassination didn’t entirely end yeti hunting,²⁶ but it definitely dampened 1950s yeti mania and drove cryptozoology deep into the shadows where it remains. In Nepal the yeti lives on as a whimsical national mascot figure spotted frequently in advertisements and tourist literature (Shrestha 2000:125).

Nepal in Popular Media Representations

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s yetis may have been hard to find in Nepal but they were making frequent appearances in popular film. Mark Chorvinsky (1989) notes that in the 1950s the yeti merely took its place in a long line of films featuring “hairy hominids.” Starting with the 1917 film *The Dinosaur and the Missing Link* and the 1925 *The Lost World* (also featuring an ape-suited “missing link”), Chorvinsky documents a long list of missing link “creature films,” most of which were set in Africa (1989:148). In the 1950s the yeti seems to have donned the missing link’s well-worn ape suit and the scenery shifted to the Himalayas.

Less than a year after Ralph Izzard’s (London) *Daily Mail* yeti expedition, the first of four English-language yeti films was on the market. *The Snow Creature* (1954) and *Man Beast* (1955) were both US productions while *Half-Human* (1957) was a Japanese film with English voice-over. *The Abominable Snowman* (1957) was British-made. The first three films feature villainous yetis with lustful predilections for human women. But in the British film yetis turn out to be a race of noble creatures more highly evolved than humans (or at least American humans). The American villain Tom Friend—apparently loosely based on Tom Slick—is an unscrupulous con-man masquerading as a scientist who ends up betraying his British col-

26. Hutchison (1989) updates the state of yeti science. As for yeti sightings, none less than the estimable Reinhold Messner (2000) describes a terrifying encounter with a yeti-like creature in eastern Tibet though Messner concludes that the yeti is really a species of high-altitude Himalayan bear.

leagues, trying to kill them while snatching the yeti for himself. Chorvinsky (1989) documents many other post-1950s films in which yetis make at least brief appearances but overall the yeti's moment of filmic fame seems to have ended with his (yetis are always male . . .) "assassination" by Hillary in 1960.

While yeti hunting in the 1950s was associated with Nepal, popular literature tended to retain a Tibetan version of the Himalayan region, even though (or, perhaps, because) Tibet had fallen behind the "bamboo curtain" of Chinese communism. In fact the fall of utopian Tibet to the godless Chinese communists was cause for great moral anguish (though not much political action) among Westerners, a fact reflected in a wide range of popular literature set in an imagined Tibet. In the 1955 novel *The Lost Glacier* (Styles 1955) yetis join forces with British fighters to push back Red Chinese invaders to protect a mystical hidden Tibetan valley (Bishop 2001:215).

The Chinese invasion of Tibet is also the backdrop of Lionel Davidson's appalling novel *The Rose of Tibet* (1962). In it a young British man heads for Tibet in search of his brother, detained after straying into Tibetan territory. The hero finds his brother imprisoned in a Buddhist nunnery in southern Tibet but, unbeknownst to him, his arrival is perfectly timed with ancient prophecies of a savior figure. What's more, the nunnery turns out to be full of nymphomaniacal nuns led by a sultry eighteen-year-old abbess who spends most of her time naked. The abbess has her way with the willing hero who must then rescue her (and her fortune in emeralds) from the Red Menace. The cover of the Penguin paperback edition—featuring a naked Asian woman, eyes downcast, with a map of Tibet literally projected onto her body—seems to capture much of the book's implicit meaning. Here a feminized fantasy Tibet is turned into an erotic temptress/victim in need of Western salvation. If the West would not come to Tibet's defense in reality, it could at least turn its moral plight into a wet dream.

The moral dilemma that post-1950 Tibet posed to the Western imagination also helps explain the phenomenal popularity of Heinrich Harrer's *Seven Years in Tibet*.²⁷ An Austrian mountaineer imprisoned by the British in northern India at the outset of World War II, *Seven Years in Tibet* recounts Harrer's 1944 escape and harrowing journey across the Himalayas to Lhasa where he lived until the Chinese invasion of 1951. (Harrer became a tutor for the young [fourteenth] Dalai Lama.) Although a great adventure yarn, *Seven Years* would never have gained such wide readership (a US Book-of-the-Month Club selection, translated into over fifty

27. Originally published in German in 1952, the book appeared in English in 1953.

languages, etc.) had it not resonated with Cold War angst (Schell 2000:90). The Tibetan mystique remained strong and, if anything, actually grew in the face of the sympathy/guilt over Tibet's perceived victimhood at the hands of the Chinese.

Nothing better illustrates this growing obsession with Tibet in the 1950s than the hugely popular writings of T. Lobsang Rampa. Starting with *The Third Eye: Autobiography of a Tibetan Lama* (1956), Rampa went on to publish more than a dozen books on Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism. Selling millions of copies in many languages and continually in print for decades, Rampa's writings have drawn generations of seekers to Tibetan Buddhism and Nepal. (The first Hebrew translations of Rampa's books triggered an unprecedented surge of Israeli tourists to Dharamsala [seat of the Tibetan government in exile in India] and Kathmandu in the mid-1990s [Norbu 2001:373].) Today the web is full of Rampa wisdom sites and Kathmandu bookshops are full of his writings.

Given his immense popularity, it may be surprising to learn that T. Lobsang Rampa is literally a figment of the Western imagination, his entire persona concocted from Theosophical and other occult works by Cyril Henry Hoskin (1910–1981). Hoskin was the chronically unemployed, mystically inclined son of a plumber from rural England when in the early 1950s he fell from a tree and woke to find his body inhabited by the spirit of a Tibetan Buddhist monk (Brauen 2004:93). The first line of his “autobiographical” *Third Eye* boldly proclaims, “I am a Tibetan.”²⁸

Hoskin/Rampa's book was immediately controversial. Eminent Tibet scholars asked to review the book uniformly rejected it as extravagant deception. It was published anyway, the editors arguing, “We think that those who believe differently will at least agree that one can recognize in the Author a rare talent for storytelling” (quoted in Lopez 1998:97). A 1958 private investigation (funded by Heinrich Harrer) forced Hoskin/Rampa to acknowledge authorship and defend the book's contents (full of fabrications and Theosophical mumbo-jumbo)—but only bolstered its popularity. Emboldened, Hoskin/Rampa wrote many more books full of astral travel, auras, extraterrestrials, UFOs, yetis, and talking cats²⁹ making him, sickeningly, both “the greatest hoaxer in the history of Tibetan Studies” (Lopez 1998:86) and “the most widely read author on Tibet” (Norbu 2001:373). As it had for Madam Blavatsky—who understood mainstream

28. Hoskin's hoax puts him in the company of other famous European impersonators of Asians beginning with George Psalmanazar, an eighteenth-century Frenchman in Britain who claimed to be Taiwanese (Keevak 2004).

29. Rampa's book *Living with the Lama* (1964) was dictated to him by his Siamese cat, Mrs. Fifi Greywhiskers.

rejection as validation of her ideas—Rampa’s dismissal by scholars (and even the Dalai Lama [Brauen 2004:97]) seems only to have confirmed his occult credibility in the eyes of credulous Tibetophiles.

From Hoskin/Rampa it is only a short step (up?) to the next level of popular literature featuring the Himalayas in the 1950s: comic books. Chapter 1 introduced the Green Lama comic books of the 1940s in which the American-turned-Tibetan-Buddhist-monk hero foils crime while chanting “Om Mani Padme Hum!” By the 1950s even Bugs Bunny, Porky Pig, Mickey Mouse, and Donald Duck were having grand Tibetan adventures in places like “Shangreet-Lo” and “Tralla-La,” Himalayan valleys full of every popular culture stereotype of Tibet and Tibetans ever imagined.³⁰

One comic book treatment of Tibet from the 1950s deserves special attention, not least because it was one of my own childhood favorites. *Tintin in Tibet*, by Belgian cartoonist Hergé (a.k.a. Georges Rémi [1907–83]), was published serially in 1958 (during the height of global yeti mania) and then as a book in 1960. Like me, recent readers of *Tintin in Tibet* assume that Hergé’s book—jam-packed with every Himalayan chestnut imaginable from yetis, to telepathy, to levitating lamas—was intended “to make fun of Western clichés,” as Bishop (2001:216) concludes.

But such was not the case. In fact Hergé was fascinated with paranormal phenomena and had learned most of what he knew about Tibet from the sensationalist books of Alexandra David-Neel (see chapter 1) (Peeters 2012:273). As for Hergé’s fascination with yetis and his remarkably detailed yeti drawings,³¹ these were the product of Hergé’s friendship with the pioneering “cryptozoologist” Bernard Heuvelmans, the Belgian advisor to Tom Slick’s yeti expeditions in Nepal. Hergé also interviewed Maurice Herzog, leader of the 1950 French Annapurna expedition. Herzog told Hergé that he had seen yeti footprints and described them in detail, no doubt as they appear on the book’s cover. Speaking of his friend’s depiction of levitating monks in Tibet, Heuvelmans wrote, “He uses the phenomenon in a very serious way, almost with deference, because he believed in it profoundly” (in Peeters 2012:273). Hergé dedicated *Tintin in Tibet* to Heuvelmans (Peeters 2012:280).

Unlike every other Tintin adventure, *Tintin in Tibet* has no villain, its plot revolving instead around Tintin’s quest to rescue an old friend (named Chang) from a plane crash in the high Himalayas. Mystical premonitions

30. In his amazing book *Dreamworld Tibet: Western Illusions* Martin Brauen catalogs these and dozens of other Western comic books featuring Tibet (along with encyclopedic coverage of hundreds of other representations of Tibet in film and literature).

31. For example, Hergé’s yeti has the unmistakable skull crest of the supposed yeti “scalp” that was eventually debunked by Hillary and the World Book Scientific Expedition of 1960.

that his friend is alive convince Tintin to travel to Nepal, with his sidekick, Captain Haddock. Hergé's drawings of Kathmandu are wonderfully detailed and accurate (including specific buildings, Nepali clothing, chilies drying, etc.) suggesting that he had either visited the city or was working from photographs.³² Tintin hires porters and a trusty Sherpa guide and is off in search of Chang. Against all odds, Tintin finds his lost friend alive in the high Himalayas, rescued by a loving and lovable yeti. On the final page Chang tells Tintin that he hopes none of the yeti-hunting expeditions are successful because they would inevitably just "treat [the yeti] like a wild animal" even though he was a caring creature with something like a "human soul."³³

Given that most of the story takes place in Nepal (the plane crashes in "Gosain Than massif," an actual ridge north of Kathmandu), *Tintin in Tibet* could just as well have been called *Tintin Goes Trekking in Nepal*. As such, the book foreshadows the "Tibetan" adventures of countless tourists who grew up with Tintin and followed him to that surrogate Tibet—Nepal. Even now *Tintin in Tibet* items are ubiquitous in Kathmandu gift shops. In 2006 Tintin became the first fictional character to receive the Dalai Lama's "Truth and Light" award for outstanding services to the Tibetan cause. The (London) *Sunday Times* quotes a spokesman as saying, "For many people around the world *Tintin in Tibet* was their first introduction to Tibet, the beauty of its landscape and its culture."³⁴ That so many people were introduced to Tibet by a comic book set in Nepal helps to explain why so many of those raised on Tintin ended up in Kathmandu in the 1960s and 1970s. Like Tintin, many of these people set out on their own vision quests into the mountains helping make trekking one of Nepal's primary "tourism products."

32. Strangely, the Devanagiri script in cartoon bubbles (used to designate incomprehensible local speech) is in Hindi, not Nepali. Biographies make no mention of a trip to Kathmandu but he may have gotten photos from his friend Han Suyin (Peeters 2012:320–21).

33. *Tintin in Tibet* also has a fascinating backstory. In the book Tintin's friend is specifically identified as Chang Chong Chen. In real life Hergé collaborated with Chinese artist Chang Chong-ren who advised Hergé on an earlier Tintin adventure set in China (*The Blue Lotus*) at which time the two became close friends. (In *The Blue Lotus* Tintin and Chang Chong Chen also become good friends.) But when Chang returned to China in 1935 Hergé lost touch with him in the turmoil of the Chinese Civil War. By 1958 Hergé had not heard from Chang for decades but hoped that his friend was still alive. Amazingly, in 1977 Hergé actually managed to reestablish contact with Chang and helped get him out of China in 1981 (Brauen 2004:128–30, Peeters 2012:318–21). With life imitating art, both stories end on a redemptive note.

34. June 1, 2006. See <http://www.timesonline.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article670276.ece>. Ironically, in 2001 the Hergé Foundation recalled a Chinese translation published as *Tintin in China's Tibet*, insisting on the correct translation of the title.

The Key to an Oriental World: Boris Lissanevitch, Kathmandu's Royal Hotel, and the "Golden Age" of Tourism in Nepal

You won't find a hotel like this anywhere else in the world. ROYAL HOTEL VISITOR

You haven't seen Kathmandu unless you've met Boris. ROYAL HOTEL VISITOR

All those present agreed that Boris was the most unusual person they had ever met. PEISSEL 1966:20

In its heyday in the early 1960s nothing in Kathmandu could compare with the Royal Hotel. A London newspaper ranked it second among "the most interesting hotels in the world" (Stephens 1979:168). The Royal had been featured in dozens—maybe hundreds—of newspaper and magazine articles through the 1950s and in the minds of the traveling public the Royal Hotel was synonymous with Kathmandu.

Ironically, the Royal Hotel's biggest attraction may not have been its location, but its flamboyant proprietor: Boris Lissanevitch or, simply, Boris—as he was known to all. A visitor in 1957 noted that tourists arriving in Kathmandu wished to be photographed with three things: in order of preference (1) Mt. Everest (which they were told was too far away to see), (2) the Abominable Snowman (which they were told was too

shy), and (3) Boris, “the famous ballet dancer and night-club king who goes hunting with film stars and maharajas” (Eskelund 1960:95). In 1961 during Queen Elizabeth’s state visit to Nepal, Prince Philip is said to have scanned the room at a reception, approached with hand outstretched, and asked, “Are you Boris?” (Simpson 1976 [1967]:65). In 1965 intrepid Irish travel writer Dervla Murphy wrote rhapsodically of Boris, “that legendary Russian whom I had already met with delight in so many books and whom I met today, with even greater delight, in person” (1967:21). Boris was one of those rare personalities more famous than the institution they made famous (Stephens 1979:163).

At its prime the Royal was both the city’s premier hotel—its registry sprinkled with Hollywood stars and other elites—and the center of Kathmandu’s expat social scene. With the only bar in town in an era known for heavy drinking, the Royal hosted a steady stream of thirsty mountaineers, diplomats, explorers, spies, missionaries, aid workers, big-game hunters, and yeti enthusiasts—along with rich and famous tourists. The Royal Hotel was the heart of Kathmandu’s foreign community with the larger-than-life figure of Boris presiding over it.

Boris’s fame was both good and bad for business. Of Boris, Murphy noted, “Next to the King he was Katmandu’s and the country’s best-known identity” (1967:62). Boris’s international prominence was not lost on King Mahendra—an insecure and jealous man famous for intimidating and jailing his political opponents (see chapter 2). Mahendra’s father had been Boris’s friend and patron but after Tribhuvan’s death in 1955 Boris was left to contend with a royal family that viewed his rising fame with ambivalence and sometimes hostility. But Boris was also useful: Kathmandu elites needed his unusual skills to pull off extravagant, world-class entertaining. As for Boris’s hotel, with so few visitors coming to Nepal, few even thought of tourism as a moneymaking venture.

But by the early 1960s, along with steadily rising tourist arrivals came the realization that there was serious money to be made on tourism. Not coincidentally, it was the royal family that made the first moves toward expanding the luxury tourism trade in Kathmandu. By the mid-1960s two new luxury hotels had opened, both under royal ownership. The royal family also saw to it that Boris lost his state catering concessions and was blocked from carrying out necessary renovations at the Royal Hotel. The Royal was forced to close its doors in 1969 after which Boris presided over a succession of failed businesses. He died in 1985 a more or less penniless and broken man. The image of Asia that Boris and the Royal Hotel had represented—an Asia of exotic adventure and Oriental splendor—had been replaced by new Western dreams.

From Ballet to the 300 Club

Born in Odessa in 1905, the son of a Czarist army officer, Boris trained as a ballet dancer before fleeing the Russian Revolution for Paris where he was hired in 1924 by Russian ballet impresario Sergei Diaghilev (1872–1929). Diaghilev’s company, “Ballets Russes,” was already famous for premiering works by Stravinsky, Debussy, and Ravel. Boris found himself at the epicenter of the avant-garde arts scene rubbing shoulders with painters, sculptors, and writers that have since become household names. Later in life Boris was self-deprecating when speaking of his ballet career, referring to himself as “one of Diaghilev’s pigs.”¹ Boris was certainly talented but when Diaghilev died in 1929, Boris—then age twenty-four—was not among those who transitioned to other top companies.

In the early 1930s Boris met his first wife, Kira Stcherbatcheva—another exiled Russian ballet dancer—and in 1933 the two accepted an invitation to tour the Far East as a two-person dance act. For three years “Kira and Boris” performed in upscale colonial hotels, nightclubs, and concert halls from Shanghai and Hong Kong, to French Indo-China and Singapore, to Calcutta and Bombay. Their act featured tangos and other popular dances all performed in elaborate costumes. The compulsively sociable Boris made connections and friendships with leading figures across Asia.²

On his first visit to Calcutta in 1934 Boris complained that in the most cosmopolitan city in India there was “no decent place to get a drink after 2:00 a.m.”—prompting a friend to jokingly suggest that Boris open such a place. With that seed planted, two years later in 1936, with his dancing career and marriage winding down,³ Boris returned to Calcutta where he floated the idea of a twenty-four-hour “mixed club” (one open to Indians *and* Europeans) to a handful of rich Indian businessmen and princes. The response was enthusiastic. Investors renovated an old mansion in central Calcutta and named Boris the managing secretary of the “300 Club,” named to suggest even more exclusivity than the already famous 400 Club in London.

The 300 Club opened in December 1936 with 180 charter members representing much of India’s princely elite plus leading businessmen and

1. Boris’s role in Diaghilev productions seems to have been less exalted than some writers have implied. Personnel lists for the mid- to late 1920s include Boris’s name only occasionally though he did perform under Stravinsky at least once. See http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/Stravinsky/full_dances.asp (accessed 11/12/07).

2. Information on Boris’s life is taken mainly from Peissel (1966), Eskelund (1960), and a 1961 interview with Boris posted on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=op3DRi1UGQo>.

3. Kira immigrated to the United States where she opened a successful ballet school (Peissel 1966:171).

international diplomats: people excluded from traditional colonial clubs. Further breaking convention, the 300 Club also admitted women, making it a center for dancing and the latest music. Boris hired another Russian, trained at the famous Cordon Bleu cooking school in Paris, to be the club's head chef. In the twilight years of the Raj the 300 Club was one of the most fashionable addresses in Calcutta, a last gasp of opulent excess made possible by colonial rule and princely privilege. While it lasted, Boris was in his element: socializing with the rich and famous, making good money, and becoming one of the best-known figures in late colonial India.

While managing the 300 Club Boris also came into contact with Nepali Rana elites who, like their Indian "princely" brethren, were active members of the club on their frequent visits to Calcutta. Through them Boris befriended the young King Tribhuvan, who later used Boris's apartment at the 300 Club to hold clandestine meetings with Nepali activists plotting the overthrow of the Rana regime (Peissel 1966:179).

With the dawn of Indian independence in 1947, the dreamworld of the 300 Club faded away along with the colonial regime that had made it possible. In the throes of Partition violence, refugees thronged the streets and the genteel culture of colonial privilege was gone. New government restrictions on liquor sales, including the loss of its all-night license, were the final blows. India's new puritanical state policies meant the end of virtually everything the 300 Club had stood for.

But Boris's life in South Asia was only entering a new phase. In 1947 he met a young Danish woman, Inger Pheiffer (1928–2013), at a party in Calcutta. As her father was a merchant ship captain, Inger had been living in Asia since childhood, eventually driven by the war to Calcutta where she lived with her mother. When she met Boris she was only nineteen, while Boris was in his early forties. Inger thought Boris looked like Peter Lorre (an American film star). As for Inger, contemporaries describe her as "tall and madly attractive" (Doig 1994:35) and "a young Scandinavian goddess" (Han 1973 [1958]:94). Against her parents' wishes, the two married in Denmark in 1948 before returning to India in 1949 (Eskelund 1960:96–97).

Boris tried his hand at several unsuccessful moneymaking schemes while keeping an eye on developments in Nepal where, in 1951, King Tribhuvan reclaimed power from the Ranas (see chapter 2). Almost immediately Tribhuvan invited his old friend Boris for a visit. Boris was charmed and soon returned with Inger (and their small family) who quickly agreed to settle in Kathmandu. "Look," Boris explained to a friend, "where can I breathe fresh air like this? Where can I find open space like this? If I live in Nepal, I'll live fifteen years longer!"

Inauspicious Beginnings

Alcohol had played a role in Boris's move to Calcutta (where he made it possible to get a drink after 2:00 a.m.) and it was also part of his decision to move to Nepal. "In Nepal there is no taboo against alcohol, and no dry laws like those being introduced in India," Boris explained (Peissel 1966:193). From elites to commoners, many Nepalis were social drinkers but alcohol production was unregulated, inconsistent, and often low-quality. Nepal needed a modern distillery, Boris concluded, and, with the king's backing, Boris imported equipment and worked out a deal granting him a state monopoly on alcohol production and importation. With the alcohol business centralized and regulated, the state stood to reap revenue benefits from what had been an untaxed cottage industry.

What seemed like a good idea to Boris and his friends turned out to be much less popular with everyone else in Nepal. At a time when practically every household made *raksi* (distilled rice alcohol), no one appreciated being told that they could no longer produce their own. Consumers also resented being forced to pay an alcohol tax. Soon the population was in open revolt. In spite of Boris's large personal investment and promised monopoly, home brewing went on unabated with government officials and police turning a blind eye. In early 1954, the government suddenly revoked Boris's import license and the whole business collapsed. Looking to sue the government for breach of contract, Boris gave up on discovering that there was no legal body capable of even recognizing such a charge (Peissel 1966:201). Boris had discovered that—even with the backing of the king and government officials—in Nepal there wasn't enough of a government in place to enforce the government's will. By mid-1954 Boris had shut down his factory, chalked up another loss, and figured (wrongly) that the alcohol affair was over.

Even before losing his license Boris had begun looking for other business opportunities that would allow him to remain in Kathmandu. As I described in chapter 2, Boris and Inger hit upon the idea of opening a high-end hotel to tap into the emerging global tourist trade, renovated part of a Rana Palace, convinced King Tribhuvan to admit a batch of tourists, and welcomed the first group in March 1955 to much international fanfare.

But when Tribhuvan died a month later, Boris was left without a royal patron and prey to intrigues of Kathmandu elite upset over his alcohol business and resentful of his close ties to the former king. Almost immediately upon Tribhuvan's death, police arrived at the Royal Hotel and arrested Boris for failure to pay taxes (Peissel 1966:201). A year earlier the government had revoked Boris's alcohol license—but not the tax obliga-

tions tied to the agreement! Because Boris had not officially informed the government that he had shuttered his distillery, in March 1955 they presented him a huge bill for back taxes. Unable to pay, Boris spent two and a half months in prison.

Why did the new king, Mahendra, not immediately recognize the farce and have the charges against Boris dropped? The charitable reading is that, amid the confusion following Tribhuvan's death, it may have taken two and a half months for the king to arrange Boris's release. Less charitably, it may be that Mahendra, whether responsible for the arrest or not, was less enamored with Boris than his father had been and was willing to let Boris feel less than welcome in the new royal dispensation.

The timing of Boris's release lends credence to this second, more sinister, reading: almost immediately upon leaving prison Boris was asked to carry out the enormous task of coordinating food and lodging for Mahendra's coronation (see chapter 2). The government's *invitation* to manage parts of the coronation was more like an *ultimatum*. Boris could make himself useful to the state, or get out. Having already lost money on the distillery, and with more money sunk into the Royal Hotel, Boris seems to have had few options but to do as commanded.⁴ With so much riding on the outcome (the Nepali state's reputation and his own future), it is not surprising that, by all accounts, Boris made a herculean effort to successfully pull off a terrifyingly difficult logistical feat. As one of Boris's close friends explained to me, "They released Boris because they needed Boris." Boris fared well as long as he was useful to the royal family. This was the case for about a decade but by the late 1960s the royal family was ready to pull Boris's plug. Boris was in prison soon after the Royal Hotel opened, and he was in prison again when it shut in 1969.

The Royal Hotel

With financial backing from Prince Basundhara (younger brother of King Mahendra), Boris and Inger leased part of a Rana palace near the old city⁵ and set about making major renovations. From kitchen equipment, dishes, and cutlery, to toilets, bed linens, and food, Boris flew in hundreds

4. Peissel's biography carefully treats Boris's imprisonment as a kind of humorous misunderstanding from which good King Mahendra finally rescues Boris. But Peissel's book, published at the height of Boris's popularity, could not risk invoking Mahendra's wrath by telling the story in a way that would impugn the king. Others I spoke with who lived through the period had a much darker view of events.

5. The building is still there, standing forlorn behind a fence across the street from the American compound on Kantipath.

of crates of supplies from Calcutta. Drawing on contacts from his days at the 300 Club, Boris also hired dozens of Indians to serve as cooks, waiters, and clerks. Boris also hired Nepalis to work alongside skilled Indian staff members with the Indians training their Nepali counterparts. Within a year most of the Indian workers had returned home.

Boris quickly established gardens on the hotel grounds where he raised European vegetables unavailable in the local market such as mushrooms, strawberries, artichokes, carrots, and beets. He also grew peaches and made peach wine (Rai 2005b). Boris even imported European Yorkshire hogs—huge white animals that caused a sensation alongside their scrawny black Nepali counterparts—establishing a herd that provided the Royal with its supply of ham and bacon.⁶ Boris built the first oven to produce Western-style bread, until then unknown in Nepal. In the absence of gas, kerosene, and even regular electricity, the Royal Hotel's kitchens ran on firewood, as did the small heating stoves in the guest rooms.

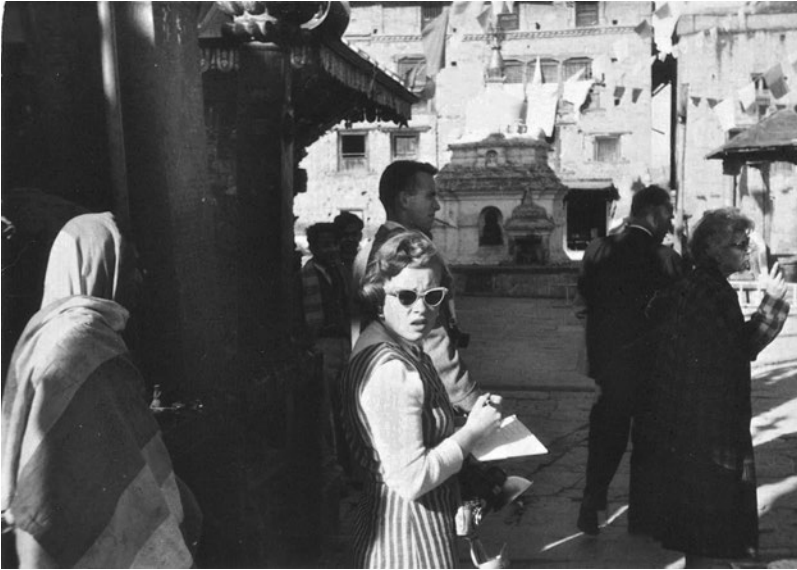
Most of the Nepali wait staff communicated with guests via smiles and sign language but Boris had to hire experienced English-speaking hotel managers from India to interact with tourists. Outside of elite circles, in the early 1950s just about the only Nepalis with a handle on English were teenaged students at the St. Xavier's School run by American Jesuits. One of these students was Ashok Sharma whose father taught Nepali language to foreigners including Inger Lissanevitch. Dropping by the Royal to look for his father one day in early 1954, Ashok met Boris with whom he chatted in English. Boris took note.

In an interview, Ashok Sharma recalled his role with the first group of foreign tourists.

When the charters started, people would initially stay for only one night! They used to land around 3:00 and go straight from the airport. . . . [Boris] managed to send them out sightseeing right from the airport. Bring the luggage to the hotel but send the people out so that they don't waste time!

But they had to be guided. Who is going to guide them? Not many people spoke English and they didn't know how to guide. So just before [the first group] came, Boris came to me and said, "You speak English. Why don't you guide them?" "Well," [Ashok said] "I can take them to some temples, but I don't know anything about

6. These hogs may be Boris's most enduring contribution to Nepali society. Pigs (*sungur*) were considered ritually impure, eaten only by relatively low-caste groups. Yet wild boar (*bandel*) were considered a delicacy eagerly hunted and eaten by elites. Boris's white hogs were also deemed edible by elites and a new Nepali term—*bangur* (combining *bandel* and *sungur*)—was coined either by Boris, or a close associate. *Bangur* is now the most commonly eaten pork in Nepal. (Thanks to Don Messerschmidt for bringing this to my attention.)



2 Tourists at Swayambhu, Dec. 1956. Courtesy of Anatol Eberhard.

temples.” [Boris] “You can do it!” [Ashok] “But I know nothing!” [Boris] “You speak English, that’s enough! Anyway, what do you expect people to learn when they’re only here for a day?”

And so Sharma guided the first two groups: from the airport straight to Pashupatinath and Bodhanath, then to the hotel, a bit of shopping, and dinner. The next morning it was more sightseeing, lunch, and back to the airport. “Finished. That was Nepal!” said Sharma.

The Royal Hotel was up and running—but few tourists came. After the first two prearranged charter groups, it was weeks before the next guests—an American couple—arrived, unannounced and on their own. “They hardly had ten guests in two months,” Ashok Sharma recalled. “But after that it started to increase. We started having about one or two guests a day.” Like Tom Mendies at the Snow View Hotel (see chapter 2), Boris relied on his wife to go to the airport to snag stray tourists that might wander off the day’s plane. Arriving passengers encountered two tall Western women, Elizabeth Mendies and Inger Lissanevitch, towering over the group of Nepali officials in their national dress outside the hut that served as the airport terminal (Rai 2005a).

With no travel agencies in Kathmandu, and electronic communications unreliable at best, making a reservation at the Royal was a challenge.

Sometimes tourists tried to cable the Royal Hotel via the various foreign diplomatic and aid missions in the city (Selby 2008:168). But Boris didn't worry much about the fine points of hotel management. One frequent guest at the Royal recalled visiting Boris in the late 1950s.

I went to see Boris once [in his apartment at the Royal Hotel]. He was in bed with a stack of cables on a table like this [holds his hands out a foot apart]. And I said to Boris, "What are those?" and he said, "Oh, people's reservations. I'll give them to the manager." I came back about six months later and that stack of cables was still there. You know, people would try to get reservations to stay at the hotel, and Boris didn't care. He had a place to live, and a place to party. Everyone loved him. He was one of these great Rabelaisian characters.

A Stay at the Royal

Why did people want to visit Kathmandu? "We wanted to go to Nepal just because it was so remote and unknown," succinctly explained one early visitor (Eskelund 1960:12). But Kathmandu was more than *just* a trophy destination for jet-setters. It exerted a powerful romantic pull of its own. When it came to Nepal, most people were "quite hazy about the country, but the capital's name was indelible" (Simpson 1976 [1967]:2). Kathmandu was etched in their imaginations from Kipling poems, music-hall ballads ("There's a one-eyed yellow idol to the north of Khatmandu . . ."), and mountaineering coverage. For Simpson, Kathmandu was

one of the best sounding place names in the world. Katmandu is up in the gazetteer's galaxy with Samarkand and Yucatan and Kandahar and Zanzibar: it belongs with Xanadu and the fictional Shangri-la. . . . [It brings to mind] barbaric splendor at an Oriental world's end. (1976 [1967]:1)

One of Han Suyin's characters probably spoke for many real visitors when she admitted that Kathmandu was a place she "wanted to go to . . . *because* of its name" (1973 [1958]:43).

Arriving by air, rather than overland, invited a new first impressions narrative in the travel literature.

We went lower. Green and yellow fields, like a pattern upon a bee's wing, little ochre farmhouses, many-roofed pagodas, pink brick houses in clusters, large white colonnaded mansions with formal gardens. It was so incongruous, to go to the Himalayas in an airplane and find a golden valley like Switzerland or northern Italy and a city in



3 Bodhanath from the air, Dec. 1956. Courtesy of Anatol Eberhard.

its middle that was a Hollywood dream of Cathay. Only the clichés of tourism could describe it: smiling Kathmandu, sunlit Nepal, and of course Shangri-la, Shangri-la. (Han 1973 [1958]:45)

Indeed it was Hollywood dreams—and especially Shangri-La—that visitors inevitably resorted to when trying to describe the Kathmandu Valley.⁷ Before they ever set foot in Nepal people had acquired lifetimes of media-derived memories filled with images and ideas about the Himalayas that profoundly shaped both what they hoped to find in Kathmandu and the language they had to describe it.

Compared with the dust, noise, heat, crowds, and conspicuous poverty of India (where all flights originated), Nepal was a welcome change. Stepping off the plane one was greeted by cool, clean air and a grand view of a huge valley ringed by mountains with the Himalayas rising over the northern horizon. Many of the valley's roads were beautiful *allées* lined with flowering trees: Persian lilacs, silky oak, bottle-brush, and jacaranda (Fleming and Fleming 1990:5).⁸ Until the early 1960s “an avenue of ancient jacaranda trees”—covered with fragrant lavender flowers in the spring—led right up to the gates of the Royal Hotel (Doig 1994:43).⁹ Although dotted with little villages and hamlets, the Kathmandu Valley didn't appear to be crowded or impoverished. “The valley seemed to breathe a complacent prosperity, a contentment natural in a place created by people in accordance with customs well suited to their needs” (Peissel 1966:190). Most valley residents were hardly “prosperous,” but excellent farmland made most people food-secure even if cash-poor.

After a drive through the countryside, Royal Hotel guests passed through a gate in a tall red brick wall into a large park-like garden with huge cedar and pine trees shading an ornamental pool. A long, U-shaped pink brick driveway swept grandly up to a pillared portico that served as the hotel's main entrance.¹⁰ Extending left and right from the three-

7. In the 1950s virtually no Western media account of Nepal could resist invoking Shangri-La and the “forbidden kingdom.” In 1955 *Newsweek* magazine even declared Kathmandu to be the “genuine Shangri-La” with Tibet having been tainted by communism (1955:34).

8. Now all that remains of these *allées*, victims of road widening, are a few street names, such as Kathmandu's Putali Sadak, or Butterfly Street, named for the insects once attracted to its long-gone jacaranda and bottle-brush trees.

9. These trees, along with another beautiful *allée* of red-blossomed bottle-brush trees connecting Kathmandu and Bodhanath, were destroyed in a road-widening project carried out for Queen Elizabeth's visit to Kathmandu in 1961 (Doig 1994:43, 48).

10. Unlike most Rana palaces, modeled after European prototypes, the Char Burja Palace (of which the Royal occupied one large wing) featured what the colonial British called an “Indo-Saracenic” style (Metcalf 1995:169), a cross between European design elements (such as long colonnaded galleries and deep porches) and South Asian—specifically Mughal—ornamentation.

storied cupola-topped entry structure were long wings each two stories tall with open fronted pillared verandas. Bougainvillea climbed the entryway and along the first-floor porches.

Nepali staff dressed in matching traditional outfits—string-tied tunics, jodhpur-like pants, Nepali caps, and scarlet sashes—carried luggage while guests mounted a marble staircase up to the grand chamber that served as the hotel’s main lobby. Before they noticed the reception desk or small curio shop, most guests stood stunned by the room’s bizarre menagerie of stuffed big-game trophies.

In the entrance hall of marble with pillars, four crocodiles, stuffed, rampaged upon the marble floor, lifting voracious and many-toothed snouts towards tourist calves. Upon carved stools two rhinoceros heads showed decapitated necks, the backs of which in papier-mâché, reproduced the severed windpipes and muscles in most realistic fashion. Tiger skins up and downstairs hung snarls down upon the walls. (Han 1973 [1958]:93)

This “inanimate zoo” (Peissel 1966:28) theme continued in the guest rooms, most of which were decorated with tiger, bear, or deer skins. Visitors used words like “florid,” “eclectic,” “Rococo,” and “baroque” to describe the Royal. Said one guest, “‘Hotel’ seemed too tame a term for [this] sprawling white pile of a former palace” (Simpson 1976 [1967]:62). The other most conspicuous feature of the Royal’s decor was the massive larger-than-life-sized oil paintings of Rana elites. Huge gold-framed paintings dominated the stairways and the cavernous interior hallways. One guest who stayed for a month in the early 1960s explained that “the Royal Hotel wasn’t just *in* a Rana palace. In fact the Royal *was* a Rana palace.” The crystal chandeliers, huge Venetian mirrors, and ornate European furniture, moved one visitor to describe entering the Royal as being like “entering an exhibit hall of some Victorian museum. . . . I felt as if I were being greeted by some exiled European lord rather than a hotel manager” (Peissel 1966:26–7).

Lord or not, Boris was certainly willing to play the part. Boris nurtured the Royal’s colonial, British Raj-like ambiance and there is no doubt that he had been attracted to Kathmandu in large part because he felt that Nepal—dominated by royal and Rana elites who were his close friends—would preserve the feudal/colonial ethos he had known and loved in India before 1947. The Royal Hotel embodied a dying age of outrageous opulence, its every feature a reminder of a bygone era of princes and maharajas, of unquestioned class dominance and racial privilege. Was the Royal Hotel’s colonial atmosphere a clever marketing strategy aimed at

rich postwar Americans eager to vicariously (re)live the glory days of colonialism? Or were the stuffed tigers, potted palms, Victorian armchairs, and legions of white-gloved servants Boris's anachronistic idea of what a hotel should be? Perhaps it was both: an Orientalist dream that Boris needed rich American tourists (the new global elite) to help keep alive.

To the right of the lobby, doors opened onto a huge grand salon or ballroom that was used as the Royal Hotel's dining area. Hung with chandeliers and wall mirrors, the room had brocade-covered imitation *louis quinze* furniture. Its windows overlooked the gardens. Most evenings a resident house orchestra, made up of musicians recruited from among Boris's old contacts in Calcutta, performed medleys of European and American show tunes and popular songs.¹¹ Meals at the Royal, which were included with the price of the room, were Western style.

To the left of the lobby extended two floors of guest rooms. Though the Royal Hotel looked massive, even at its peak it never had more than forty-eight guest rooms. Those on the ground floor were smaller (though still large), portioned into smaller spaces from the original rooms. The VIP rooms—at least initially left in all their Rana splendor—were on the second floor. Desmond Doig described his stay in one of these not long after the Royal Hotel opened.

I padded after a conducting bearer carrying my luggage down an endless front verandah, up a steep side staircase, down a peeling corridor, through an enormous doorway labeled "Number One" into a room the size of the airport. A carpet tried to cover some of it. French windows fought bravely to dispel a kind of powder-puff-blue gloom created by musty wallpaper and a ceiling painted with clouds and misshapen cherubs. The bed was frighteningly small and seemed to apologize for being there. The loo, when I eventually reached it, was almost the size of the bedroom and like punished children, two WCs, a pissoir and a bath cowered in distant corners. I had to, but I felt I shouldn't use the pissoir. In that vast room, so human an act seemed sacrilegious. I went and closed the doors so the angels wouldn't see. (1994:7)

In such a huge structure central heating was impossible but each room did have its own wood-burning stove that doubled as a boiler for bath water—available at two hours' advance notice (Peissel 1966:36–40). Because the valley's electricity supply was subject to violent voltage swings—capable of melting any unprotected device—guests were advised against using portable electric gadgets. For tourists used to luxury hotels, the Royal—

11. At least initially Boris also staged an outdoor "floor show" for tourists: "a campfire show featuring native Nepali dancers and singers" (*Chicago Daily Tribune* 1955).

despite its pretensions—was still roughing it. Then again, as Morris pointed out, “nobody in their senses” visited Nepal for either great food or lodging (1963:51).

Not all the Royal’s guests were rich and famous but many were one or the other. By far the most important were the wealthy-but-not-famous round-the-world tourists who visited Nepal on side charters from India (see chapter 2). The vast majority of these were wealthy, elderly, and American (Satyal 1999:75). Paying full rates and filling up much of the hotel during the spring and fall peak seasons, rich old Americans kept the Royal Hotel afloat. Package tourists traveling in groups, managed and booked by international travel agencies, were the foundation of the Royal’s business. The problem was that groups rarely stayed more than a few days and when they left, the hotel was often empty for days or weeks, especially in the off-seasons.

The Royal Hotel also attracted more than its share of the world’s rich *and* famous. These ranged from American billionaire John D. Rockefeller III and German industrialist Alfred Krupp to European and Asian royalty. (Spanish Prince—later King—Juan Carlos came to the Royal for his honeymoon [Rai 2005b].) American politician and ambassador Averell Harriman stayed at the Royal as did Nobel Prize-winning economist John Kenneth Galbraith, the famous explorers Freya Stark, Peter Fleming, Ella Maillart, and even some Russian cosmonauts. The Royal also attracted famous authors such as Agatha Christie, Richard Mason (*The World of Suzie Wong*) and, of course, Han Suyin.¹² By far the most glamorous guests were the assorted Hollywood film and television stars often spotted at the Royal. Vivian Leigh, Jennifer Jones,¹³ Marlin Perkins, Walter Pidgeon, and Cary Grant stayed at the Royal but the celebrity most closely associated with the hotel was Ingrid Bergman. Bergman became a close friend of Boris and Inger, and a frequent guest at the Royal. Recalling movie stars and millionaires, one longtime Kathmandu expat remembered the Royal Hotel as “a very jet-setty kind of place.”

Guests in the famous-but-not-rich category included mountaineers that frequently used the Royal Hotel as their Kathmandu base. In the 1950s and 1960s Sir Edmund Hillary frequented the Royal on his way to or from the Everest region. From 1955 onward most large climbing groups

12. One frequent guest at the Royal remembered seeing Han Suyin “sitting out on the front porch with her typewriter. Nobody knew what she was doing. She was Eurasian so she wasn’t quite accepted into society. There was a party . . . and she wasn’t invited. You know the bias in those days, the class thing, especially with the British.”

13. Jones had starred as the slanty-eyed Eurasian heroine in *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* (1954), the Hollywood version of Han Suyin’s autobiographical novel *A Many-Splendored Thing* (1952).

used the Royal Hotel where Boris offered special “expedition rates” (Peissel 1966:229). The spring climbing season often found the Royal’s gardens strewn with piles of expedition gear along with tents for climbers and crew. In his apartment Boris displayed an amazing rock collection—bits of the summits of Everest, Makalu, Dhaulagiri, and other eight-thousand-meter peaks—brought to him by grateful mountaineers (McDonald 2005:83).

Finally there were the neither rich nor famous guests. These included researchers (zoologists, ornithologists, anthropologists, geologists), artists, and the first hearty overland travelers making their way across Asia. At 152 Indian rupees per night the Royal Hotel was very expensive for its day (Elliot 1959:87)¹⁴ and most budget travelers stayed at the Snow View Hotel or elsewhere. In 1960 an irascible guest, John Morris, complained that the Royal Hotel was “as dear as a luxury hotel in Europe; beyond the means of other than the wealthy American tourists for whom it is intended” (1963:52). (He stayed at the Snow View.) But people willing to swallow their pride and ask Boris for a break often got the reply given to indigent anthropologist Michel Peissel: “Of course stay here. Don’t worry about the rates. Those are for tourists” (1966:26). For Boris “tourists” paid the bills while others—like mountaineers, scholars, travelers—were welcome contributors to conversations over cocktails.¹⁵

Added to this menagerie of guests was another menagerie of animals. Boris seems to have had a soft spot for exotic animals and at one point even became an animal dealer (Izzard 1955:97). Boris kept a veritable zoo on the premises including deer, pangolins, panthers, binturongs, Himalayan black bears, flying squirrels, red (or lesser) pandas, and an array of spectacular Himalayan pheasant species (Peissel 1966:233–34). One frequent guest I interviewed remembered the bears in particular. “They’d get out occasionally. They’d come through the hotel at night and we’d have to come out and chase them back into the cage.” Some of the Royal’s most famous animals belonged to Inger’s Danish mother, known affectionately as Ma Scott. Beyond the usual cats and Lhasa apso dogs were some more unusual pets including a pony which, according to a longtime Kathmandu expat, “used to walk through the corridors and nip the occasional bottom it encountered” as well as leaving unwelcome offerings here and there. Doig remembers small herds of ponies that roamed the Royal’s grounds and “at least once a day . . . came clattering down the verandah to be fed lumps of sugar or carrots” (1994:35).

The most famous of Ma Scott’s pets was a beautiful red panda named

14. About forty US dollars, a sizable sum at that time.

15. According to one of Boris’s hotel managers, the only people categorically turned away from the Royal’s doors were the hippies who began descending on Nepal during the Royal’s last years.

Pandaji, a gift from none other than Edmund Hillary (Selby 2008:85). Pandaji could be found wandering around the hotel, napping on people's beds, and nipping the fingers of tourists who got too close. Anyone who has seen a red panda can understand why Pandaji became "the most photographed animal in Nepal" and even acquired a degree of international fame by being featured in numerous articles—including one entitled "Panda in My Bathtub"—published around the world (Peissel 1966:233).¹⁶

Other animals at the Royal were less welcome. One guest remembered "cat-sized rats" running across his bed at night in 1963. Another visitor in 1961 describes waking to a loud thump in the night to find a large rat rummaging through his suitcase. While his wife stood on the bed he chased the rat under a cabinet before calling for help.

A barefoot sweeper came in, held the rat in the corner with his broom, crawled under the cabinet, and emerged holding the rat by its tail. To him it seemed like an everyday event. The rat was probably released outdoors only to make his foray into someone else's chambers that night or the next. (Selby 2008:26–27)

But the most amazing Royal Hotel animal story I heard came from a businessman who stayed at the hotel many times in the 1950s and 1960s. He described venturing into the Royal's kitchen one day in search of hot water.

Here there were five or six cooks. A very greasy Bengali—filthy dirty—doing things with pots. And there's all these urchins, all these kids running around wearing these filthy dirty T-shirts. And in the middle of the floor was this enormous white pig lying, this *gigantic* pig in the middle of the kitchen! So I said to the cook, "What's that?" And he said, "Oh, he keeps the kitchen clean. Watch this." So he threw him a cabbage leaf and the pig goes, *chomp!* The pig was *living* in the kitchen!

He went on to describe the Royal Hotel in less than flattering terms.

It was a rat-infested, flea-bitten place past its prime. It was one of the *worst* hotels in the world. There was no room service. There'd be no hot water. But there was nowhere else. And you'd go down to breakfast and Ingrid Bergman was sitting there. Cary Grant was at the bar at night. It was unbelievable! Walter Pidgeon, the king of Sikkim, you'd never know who might be there. But it was the only place to stay and it was *awful*. Boris though was a great character. He was a party man. So he'd party all night, sleep until twelve, get up, go down to the bar, get drunk. And that's what he did.

16. Pandaji died in the late 1960s of mange contracted from some of Ma Scott's dogs (Selby 2008:187).

When I suggested that he might have patronized the Snow View Hotel instead, he sniffed, “That wasn’t an option.” No one who was anyone even *thought* about staying anywhere but the Royal Hotel.

An opulent palace with rats and no hot water; an isolated outpost at the end of the earth where one might rub shoulders with global elites; a place where one “had” to stay even if you complained about it; one of the best and worst hotels in the world. The man responsible for this magic was Boris, the eccentric anachronism with a fairy-tale past who reveled in his role as host, socialite, and raconteur.

Boris

Through a lifetime of interacting with people, Boris had perfected “the art of making total strangers feel important and accepted” (Peissel 1966:33). Boris was a never-ending font of entertaining stories, sometimes approaching the level of tall tales. But because his stories were not self-serving or mean, they were taken in good fun. Never have I known of a person who so many people independently described as a “raconteur”—someone who has mastered the art of conversation and storytelling. By all accounts he was equally affable to everyone from wealthy elites to poor nobodies. One woman, barely twenty when she traveled through Nepal in 1966, described Boris as “a darling man, absolutely open to everyone. It didn’t matter who you were, he was interesting and *interested*.” A long-term expat described Boris as “the host par excellence. He was generous with his time. He was generous with his vodka and his delicious food. He was an amazing host. And he was a real bohemian.”

Boris was “bohemian” in that he was perfectly at home with his own eccentricities. Everyone remembered the way he dressed. Morning, noon, and night, from summer to winter, Boris wore what amounted to a uniform: short-sleeved, open-necked bush shirts—usually colorfully striped—worn untucked over gray flannel trousers. Aside from at state functions that demanded a tuxedo, Boris wore loose, casual clothing no matter what others were wearing.¹⁷ During his Royal Hotel years Boris was of average height but more than average weight, his loose shirts perhaps designed to divert attention from his “unusually rotund” paunch (Stephens 1979:160). He had a full head of black hair which he wore parted straight down the middle in a style straight from the Roaring Twenties. He spoke English,

17. One photo in Peissel’s 1966 book (between pages 174 and 175) shows Boris and Inger standing for a formal photo with Boris the only male in the picture sans necktie.

French, and Nepali with a distinctly Russian accent. He was an excellent chef and sommelier. One visitor described Boris as an always-smiling “bundle of energy” with a “twinkle in his eyes” (Selby 2008:25–26). Perhaps summing it all up, others described Boris as having “panache”—a laid-back, unselfconscious flair toward which people naturally gravitated.

Yet for all his gifts as a host, Boris was a notoriously poor businessman. He was generous, literally, to a fault. “His heart was too big,” commented one visitor in the late 1960s who noted Boris’s propensity for sacrificing profits for charity. In a business that involved expensive imported products, Boris’s pricing was inconsistent and often below market rates (Simpson 1976 [1967]:68). Too many guests were of the nonpaying variety and at least one person observed a “long line of poor persons fed by [Boris] every day at the back door of the hotel” (Sitwell 1962:99). It was Ashok Sharma, the talented, energetic young English-speaking Nepali man that Boris originally hired to guide tourists, who carried most of the day-to-day managerial load and held the place together. “It was apparent that, for Boris, managing was a necessary chore. Socializing was the real reward” (Selby 2008:25).

If Boris had a dark side it was his relationship with alcohol. Everyone who knew him agreed that he had a drinking problem even if he was not a “problem drunk.” Alcohol was a basic part of his social functioning. Close friends recalled that he was rarely without a glass in his hand. His normal daily routine was to sleep late, have, as one person remembered, “a tall glass of whisky for breakfast” and then keep drinking till late at night. “He drank like a fish. He got out of bed in the morning and started drinking,” said another frequent guest. In an era known for heavy social drinking, Boris was a relatively high-functioning alcoholic.

The Yak & Yeti Bar

Nowhere was Boris more in his element—a lively mixture of people, conversation, and alcohol—than at the Royal Hotel’s bar, the Yak & Yeti. As the only bar in a city with no night life whatsoever, the Yak & Yeti quickly became the social hub not just for the hotel, but for Kathmandu’s elite and expat community as a whole. One visitor described it as the “hollow into which all Kathmandu gossip finally trickles” (Murphy 1967:22). Even without hotel guests the Yak & Yeti was a lively place with diplomatic and aid workers, Rana and royal family elites, and anyone else who happened to be around, all swapping stories. Add an assortment of eccentric stars, mountaineers, travelers, and academics and you had a fascinating milieu.

In 1959 a *Sports Illustrated* correspondent noted the Royal's remarkable bar scene: "The patrons of the Y & Y [*sic*] consist of French anthropologists, Japanese entomologists, Mexican broadcasters, Swiss explorers, American correspondents, Harvard ornithologists, rhinoceros hunters, zoo keepers, Yeti hunters, hikers, and holy men."

Presiding over this never-ending feast of stories and intrigue was Boris, who relished his role as the clearing house of all gossip. According to Inger, "Boris spent most of his time at the bar entertaining people. . . . The Royal was where everybody came to socialize. Everybody floated around him and I couldn't get enough of him for myself" (Rai 2005b). One newcomer to the Yak & Yeti scene described how suddenly "everyone stood up" when one man entered the room. Not having been introduced to Boris, he assumed the honored personage to be some kind of royalty, "perhaps even a dethroned prince. . . . judging by the greetings he received from people who went out of their way to nod when they either arrived or left, and by the respect he enjoyed from our small group" (Stephens 1979:161). In his bar, drink in hand, surrounded by a dazzling array of adoring humanity, Boris *was* like a prince.

While the rest of the hotel retained its Rana ambiance, the Yak & Yeti (on the second floor, above the dining room) had a different style from the beginning. The name and decor were Inger's ideas. A London art school graduate, Inger designed the bar's logo script and painted the shaggy yaks and trails of cartoon yeti footprints across the walls. The bar's focal point was a large circular red brick fireplace under a heavy funnel-shaped copper chimney suspended from the ceiling. "Comfortable arm chairs were arranged around the fire, and those who lounged there propped their feet up on the bricks" (Stephens 1979:160). A Peace Corps volunteer recalled how he and his buddies, in Kathmandu on R&R during the winter, would come to the Royal not so much for food, drink, or gossip, as to just sit beside the blazing fire. Sharing a glass of scotch and sitting for hours, they actually got warm for the first time in months.

One frequent local visitor at the Yak & Yeti was Prince Basundhara, the younger of King Mahendra's two brothers¹⁸ and Boris's business partner. On the one hand, Basundhara was "shy and retiring," someone who "strived to 'fit in.' . . . It was clear that he wanted to be liked. . . . [H]is laughter often was held back, his eyes were downcast" (Selby 2008:91–92). On the other hand, Basundhara was a womanizer and heavy drinker, presumably to help overcome his shyness. Already in the early 1950s Ma-

18. Of Tribhuvan's three legitimate heirs the first two (Mahendra and Himalaya) were born to Tribhuvan's first wife, while the third, Basundhara, was the child of Tribhuvan's second wife.

hendra had to apologize to a Western woman for Basundhara's drunken advances, explaining that "my brother drinks too much" (Fleming and Fleming 1990:15). Though married into a high-ranking Rana family, Basundhara had a number of very public relationships with foreign women. He apparently married an American named D'Lynn Waldron in 1958 though the marriage was not recognized in Nepal.¹⁹ Then in 1961 Basundhara met Barbara Adams at the Yak & Yeti bar. Adams arrived as a journalist but stayed on for years as Basundhara's companion (and remained a prominent fixture in Kathmandu's expat scene until her death in 2016). Basundhara went on to have other foreign female "consorts" before his death (of cirrhosis of the liver [Stephens 1995:184]) in 1977.²⁰ Between wine and women, Basundhara acquired the reputation of being "the 'enfant terrible' of the royal family" (Selby 2008:91).

Nepal's position as a "front line" state—on the border of Red China—also meant that there were plenty of Cold War spies among the patrons at the Yak & Yeti bar. "It was the only meeting place here and everybody came," recalled one longtime expat. "All sorts of people came and you could never tell who they were, what they were. Strange foreigners would turn up there, and the KBG and CIA would meet each other there. And then there were the mountaineers . . ." Here my informant expounded on how people were suspected of spying while claiming to be climbers, explorers, hikers, and anthropologists—all of whom wanted to get as close to the Chinese border as possible.²¹ In the late 1950s the CIA began training and aiding Tibetan Khampa rebels in their resistance to the Chinese invasion of Tibet making Kathmandu an important administrative and supply center (Clarridge 1997; Selby 2008). In the tiny expat community everyone knew (and suspected) everyone and even the most innocent meetings at the Yak & Yeti could trigger whispers of dark intrigue. One expat described sitting in the Yak & Yeti with Boris and a few other guests. A question to one guest about what had brought him to Kathmandu elicited a swift kick under the table from Boris who later explained, "In Kathmandu never ask anyone what they're doing!" (Doig 1994:10).

If the Yak & Yeti was the hotel's social center, then Boris and Inger's apartment was its inner sanctum. A rickety circular iron staircase led to the third floor where a large, high-ceilinged room with huge windows

19. Waldron has assembled an amazing collection of photos and clippings documenting her relationship with Basundhara at her website; see http://www.dlwaldron.com/dlw_nepal.html.

20. The grim joke still circulating in Kathmandu is that Basundhara was so flammable from a lifetime of alcohol consumption that his cremation required no firewood.

21. In fact the link between Himalayan mountaineering and Cold War espionage is now very well documented. See Wignall 1996.

offered commanding views of the Kathmandu Valley. There Boris built a large fireplace and somehow managed to install a grand piano on which he arranged signed photographs of famous European dancers and actors, royalty, and Hollywood stars.

One glance was enough to stagger the imagination. The room looked like a Hollywood movie set. It was in many ways elegant, and yet garish. There were divans and sofas, Oriental coffee tables and sideboards, Persian rugs and magnificent lamps, and a life-time collection of priceless antiques. On the walls hung fine oils and, above a carved writing desk in a far corner, were framed photographs of Boris's dancing career. (Stephens 1979:162)

With music from his huge record collection playing, a fire at the hearth, an excellent dinner (often prepared by Boris himself) with fine wines and rich conversation, there were few more coveted invitations than to Boris and Inger's flat for a dinner party.

The downside of Boris's fame and extreme conviviality was their impact on his marriage and children. A friend of Inger's from her Royal Hotel days remembered that "Inger was a little bit aloof. She had to be because Boris was so aggressive, socially aggressive. So for Inger to have any privacy, she had to withdraw from that." With Boris's aggressive socializing, there simply wasn't much attention left for Inger who complained, "I couldn't get enough of him for myself" (Rai 2005b). Inger claimed that "in the first fifteen years we had been married, I had spent only two evenings alone with him" (Stephens 1995:165). For Inger Boris's sociability was almost pathological: "When you love someone you want to share their life, their thoughts, their feelings. . . . I wanted [Boris] to talk about himself, but he wouldn't" (Stephens 1995:165).

By the late 1950s Inger was so "fed up" that she took the children and went to live with her mother in Hong Kong.

Six months later, Boris came to get me. We spent ten days alone and talked more than we had in ten years. He promised things would be different from now on and that he would spend weekends with the family. So I came back and we started spending the weekends at Ichangu, away from the hotel and his guests. We lived there in a lovely old house. (Rai 2005b)

One wonders if it took Boris six months to notice that Inger was gone. Nevertheless, Boris eventually acknowledged his marital problems and worked to improve the situation.

One of the conditions for, or at least consequences of, Inger's return to

Kathmandu was the arrival of her mother, Esther “Ma” Scott. A short Danish woman with tightly curled red hair, Ma Scott roamed the Royal wearing “the highest high heels” followed by a troop of stray animals that she had adopted (Doig 1994:35). Her compassion found a human outlet in the traumatized Tibetan refugees who had begun to flow into the Kathmandu Valley around the time of her arrival, in the aftermath of the Chinese invasion. Ma Scott opened a curio shop in the Royal’s lobby specializing in Tibetan handicrafts and antiques with proceeds going to the Tibetan community. But no one was more grateful for Ma Scott’s presence than Inger: until her death in 1970 Ma Scott helped make up for the companionship that Boris had trouble providing (Rai 2005b).

“The Money-Giving People”: Nepali Interactions with Tourists

Beyond communicating with hotel staff, the main way that tourists interacted with Nepalis was by hiring a tour guide. Already in 1957 the Nepal government began offering courses to train tourist guides (Satyal 1999:35). Naturally guides often had friendly relations with clients and clients were often very generous. One man told me that the standard fee in 1962 when he began working as a guide was fifteen Nepali rupees for a half day, and twenty-five for a full day (roughly two to three US dollars). Yet tourists would almost always give him a tip “of not less than forty or fifty dollars and very often 100 dollars!” At a time when most Kathmandu adults were lucky to earn a few rupees a day, this was astonishing. Once he started guiding, he realized that “I just couldn’t get out of this trade! I mean it was *a lot* of money! I had never *seen* so much money. These tourists were *rich!*”²²

In fact most Nepalis had little idea of what tourists and tourism were. In the 1950s most Nepalis, deprived of even the most basic education, had mental maps of the world that extended to India, Tibet, and vaguely Britain. Many people were painfully aware of their former isolation and eager to make the kind of human contacts that had been prohibited by the Ranas. Yet the chances of doing so were slim. Visiting the Royal Hotel was out of the question. One man recalled how a cup of tea at the Royal cost many times the daily earnings of most Nepalis.

The language barrier between tourists and Nepalis led to some awkward

22. Some tourists were astonishingly generous. Two former guides I interviewed took up tourist offers to put them through college in the US.

but sincere encounters. One tourist told me of how, in the 1950s, she was often the first foreigner Nepalis had seen. “I was wearing silk stockings and they’d touch my legs to see what it was. Was it skin or was it something else? And they’d touch my hair. It was just totally innocent.” She also described people crowding around her car, not to look in, but to see their own reflections in the windows and paint. But it wasn’t long before money overcame people’s initial apprehensions. According to one guide,

after a few times, let’s say a few years, three or four years; these people also knew that the tourists are the ones who give them money. I mean in those days tourists used to give ten rupees [to each] child. Let’s say in 1965 if you give ten rupees to a little child, and the salary of his father is only thirty rupees in a month, it’s a wonderful amount of money!

So all these children, they would go and say “bye-bye” and “hello.” Gradually they began to think that tourists are the money-giving people. . . . They began to love them. But unfortunately, it was not because of anything else but the money.

One of the few surviving critical Nepali perspectives on tourism from this early period is a powerful short story by Shankar Lamichhane entitled “The Half-Closed Eyes and the Setting Sun.”²³ Lamichhane’s story—inspired by the experience of working with a *National Geographic* photojournalist—consists of two monologues. In the first a tourist glibly expounds his expert knowledge of Nepal, concluding that “the spirit of Nepal is encapsulated in the smiles on the faces of its people.” “It is a smile of welcome. . . . This is a land of eyes, a land watched over by the half-closed eyes of the Buddha.”

In the second monologue a Nepali guide promises to show the tourist “a pair of eyes which will reveal ‘the pulse of our reality.’” The guide takes the tourist to the home of a poor farmer whose son is afflicted by polio, and informs the boy’s parents that the tourist is a medical doctor!

Yesterday, you were swept away by waves of emotion, inspired by your “Black and White” whisky, and you urged me to show you eyes which would forever remind you of your visit to Nepal. So I have brought you here to show you eyes like that. . . . That smile you described is on their faces, as if you were their eldest son who has brought a life-restoring remedy for your brother from across the seven seas.

The guide brutally confronts the tourist with happy, smiling faces. But these are smiles of desperate hope that the rich foreigner will cure their

23. Or *Ardhamudit Nayan ra Duna Legeko Gham*. Excerpts are from Michael Hutt’s translation (1996:57–58).



4 Tibetans and tourist at Bodhanath, Dec. 1956. Courtesy of Anatol Eberhard.

son and save them from a miserable fate. Lammichhane's story is a withering critique of Western hubris and romantic projections.

Five-Star Politics and the Demise of the Royal Hotel

In 1958 Nepal received only 2,056 Western tourists (Satyal 2000:5) leaving hotels like the Royal and Snow View under-occupied and even empty for good parts of the year. But by 1962 arrival figures rose to six thousand, doubled to twelve thousand by 1966, and by 1969 around forty-five thousand non-South Asian foreigners visited Nepal (Satyal 1999:36). Tourism was growing at a phenomenal rate and, with tourism earnings far outpacing expectations, Nepalis were beginning to reconsider tourism's economic implications.

Though King Mahendra never embraced tourism as a development strategy, others in the royal family were quicker to grasp its moneymaking potential. Exempted from import duties that made provisioning the luxury tourism market so costly, royals knew that their old feudal privileges would guarantee continued advantages in the new "free market" economy. Pressure from the royal family helped elevate the government's tourism oversight to the level of a separate department in 1962 and helped

write tourism expansion—including building new luxury hotels—into Nepal’s second national planning period (1962–65) (Satyal 1999:34–5).

In 1962 representatives of Prince Himalaya (the king’s brother) approached the Nepal Industrial Development Corporation (NIDC),²⁴ securing a loan to build a luxury hotel on the outskirts of Kathmandu (Selby 2008:152–53). Because it was a state project associated with the royal family, the materials needed to build the five-star hotel (from carpeting to curtains, plumbing to elevators) were imported duty free. The Soaltee opened its doors in late 1965 and managed to pay off its 4.5 percent interest NIDC loan in just four years.

Princess Helen Shah led the construction of a second royal family-linked luxury hotel that opened soon after the Soaltee. Built along the recently opened Durbar Marg on Rana-owned land near the royal palace, the Annapurna Hotel had four stars (to the Soaltee’s five)²⁵ but was much more centrally located. With royal connections, this hotel too imported massive amounts of foreign goods, duty free. Like the Soaltee, the Annapurna Hotel prospered and by late 1966 was already “heavily booked” (Simpson 1976 [1967]:24).

Annapurna co-owner Princess Helen Shah’s ties to this story are complex. She was the long-suffering Nepali (Rana) wife of Prince Basundhara, the womanizing playboy co-owner of the Royal Hotel. Surely her role in the Annapurna Hotel was—perhaps among other things—a swipe at her estranged husband. Princess Helen was also the younger sister of Princess Princep, wife of Himalaya, Basundhara’s older brother and owner of the Soaltee. (Helen and Princep were also sisters of Prabhakar SJB Rana, a close associate of Himalaya’s in the Soaltee enterprise.) This meant that Helen’s hotel was in direct competition not only with her good-for-nothing husband’s but also with her sister and brother’s business. Finally, Helen, Princep, and Prabhakar were all grandchildren of General Bahadur, the man from whom Boris and Basundhara were leasing the Royal Hotel’s buildings and grounds. With so much royal entanglement the possibilities for intrigue were great, especially with big money at stake.

By 1966 the high-end hotel market in Kathmandu had changed dramatically: from the *only* luxury hotel in town, the Royal had become the lesser of three. Worse still, the royal family secured legislation mandating an official hotel classification system (Satyal 2000:209). In the new rankings the Soaltee got five stars, the Annapurna four, and the Royal Hotel only three. In 1966 Boris refused to have the Royal listed in a new tourist

24. The NIDC was a government body that promoted economic development with support and capital from the United States Overseas Mission (USOM), the forerunner of USAID.

25. Later an expanded and renovated Annapurna Hotel was rated at five stars (Satyal 1999:63–64).

brochure. Boris suggested “they could go to hell and take their three stars with them” (Simpson 1976 [1967]:68).

The Royal Hotel could still bank on Boris’s personal fame but when given a choice between eccentric charm (the Royal) and modern comfort (the others) many tourists opted for the latter. In one amusing but telling incident, Colin Simpson describes an irate American woman in the Royal’s lobby who, even before she checked in, had decided to switch to the Annapurna Hotel. Asked what the problem was, the American huffed, “I’m standing at the reception desk . . . and I look over my shoulder and what do I see—right there in the foyer? *A horse!*” Hearing of this Boris glibly replied, “What did she expect—a rhinoceros?” Two years earlier this tourist would have had to grin and bear it—at the Royal Hotel. Now she had the choice to leave, and did. Even with tourist numbers growing, fewer and fewer people were willing to put up with the offbeat eccentricities of the Royal Hotel.

Similarly, whereas earlier many Westerners were attracted to the Royal’s Raj-like opulence, by the mid-1960s—the era of high modernism—the Royal’s colonial ethos was increasingly a liability. Describing a stay at the Royal in 1965, Dervla Murphy fondly noted the hotel’s “ludicrous magnificence, both in the building itself . . . and in the Grand Opera décor, which is so gorgeously ‘un-with-it’ that one is immediately charmed into forgiving its excesses” (1967:21). Despite this faint praise, the Royal Hotel was increasingly a grotesque anachronism that may have charmed some into forgiveness, but increasingly few.

By 1965 the Royal Hotel was not in good shape. Earlier visitors were overwhelmed by the Royal’s exotic aura but now most commented on its problems. Now the Royal was a “not-so-white building in need of refurbishing” (Selby 2008:23). Its “plumbing is uncertain, the electricity a bit on the sporadic side, and the whole affair looks as if it needs rehabilitation” (Bernstein 1970:64). One guest who stayed at the Royal in 1967 told me, “You wouldn’t call it ritzy. *Definitely* interesting, but not ritzy!” A *Washington Post* article referred to it as “the decaying Royal Hotel” (Coughlin 1970).

Boris was well aware that the Royal desperately needed updating. Already in the early 1960s he began remodeling the dining room, replacing Rana-era Victorian decor with locally made furniture, paneling, and carved decorative elements that referenced at least some version of the local Nepali context (Peissel 1966:252). For the first time Boris acknowledged that tourists came to the Royal not for its nineteenth-century European idea of elegance, but for its exotic location. Whereas colonials had gone to Boris’s 300 Club to *escape* Asia, now tourists came to Kathmandu to “experience” Asia—within comfortable limits. Boris tried rebrand his

hotel though one feels that his heart was never really in it. He was as much an anachronism as the Royal Hotel itself.

Even more than financial, the challenges Boris faced in trying to renovate the Royal Hotel stemmed from interference from royal family members (and hotel owners) who wanted him out of business (Simpson 1976 [1967]:68–69). In 1967 Boris played his own royal card. With Prince Basundhara, Boris tried to purchase (rather than lease) the Royal Hotel. General Bahadur (the landlord) accepted a 50 percent down payment but Boris was vulnerable. Boris had verbally negotiated a 50/50 profit split with Basundhara. But in the written contract accompanying the final payment, Boris's share had been reduced to 30 percent. Furious, Boris stormed out of the room and refused to speak with Basundhara for almost two years. Boris continued to manage the Royal but, with no guarantees of future ownership, all he could do was watch the building deteriorate. Eventually facing eviction, Boris decided to take matters to court but soon acknowledged that there was no way to defeat the powerful interests ranged against him. By late 1968 Boris and Basundhara were again speaking though now Basundhara dictated the terms of their relationship.

For Boris things went from bad to worse. In early 1969 police arrived at Boris and Inger's apartment, arrested Boris, and began stuffing antiques into boxes, including a priceless ancient Mongolian *thanka*—a personal gift from King Tribhuvan—ripped from its frame, crumpled, and destroyed. Inger fled to the nearby US ambassador's residence where she stayed with her friend Ambassador Carol Laise. There she learned that Boris had been arrested on charges of illegal trafficking in antiquities.²⁶

Everyone knew that the charges were just, in one expat's words, "an excuse to get Boris out of the way" (McDonald 2005:112). "Nepalis can be very jealous in a way," another expat told me. "The royals didn't need the money but there was some jealousy." One person speculated that the four-page article on Boris published by *Life* magazine in 1967 had made the king, or his retinue, envious. The final straw may have been an interview in an Indian newspaper in early 1969 in which Boris referred to King Mahendra as a "simple man." Meant to be a compliment—the king as a "man of the people," etc.—the king reportedly took it as an insult, an insinuation that "His Majesty" was no better than a commoner.

In court the charges against Boris fell through, but the damage was done. (A friend of Boris's told me that the only time he ever saw Boris weep was when shown the destroyed *thanka* given him by his old friend

26. The fact that Boris's arrest coincides with King Mahendra's establishment of a powerful Tourism Development Committee chaired by members of the royal family (Shrestha and Shrestha 2012:60–61) seems hardly coincidental.

Tribhuvan. It must have seemed that the last link to a golden age had been severed.) In the meantime, the government made its final move. It closed down the Royal Hotel, terminated its pending sale, and took over the entire building for official use (as it remains to this day).

The Last Years

During his last years at the Royal, aware that the hotel's days were numbered, Boris began looking for other opportunities that would allow him to stay in Nepal and continue doing what he loved. Sometime in the late 1960s, with financial backing from a wealthy Nepali, Boris leased and renovated part of another old Rana palace nearby. This time the lease was in Boris's own name, giving him more control over the business. By 1970 the new Yak & Yeti Restaurant was up and running, featuring French haute cuisine and fine wines.²⁷ As maître d', Boris could concentrate on what he did best—making people happy—while leaving Ashok Sharma, the Royal's old manager, to run the business. “Boris had already earned his good will at the Royal Hotel so everyone was coming [to the restaurant],” recalled Ashok. “That place used to be jammed!”

But what started small quickly grew, leaving Boris behind. Among the contented diners were World Bank officials who proposed a new luxury hotel to go with Boris's restaurant (Chand 2000:63). The World Bank would provide 70 percent of the money as a low-interest loan if Boris and his partner could raise 30 percent. Boris had big plans for the new Yak & Yeti Hotel, including careers for one son and daughter-in-law—a couple with little experience and already tarnished local reputations. This was too much for Boris's Nepali partner who was willing to put up with Boris's eccentricities (alcoholism, poor business judgment) in return for his charismatic appeal, but not willing to jeopardize the new hotel by appointing more Lissanevitchs to key management positions.

Whereas the original restaurant lease was in Boris's name, the new hotel was registered in his Nepali partner's name. Shortly before the hotel opened, Boris's partner asked Boris to fold the restaurant into the larger hotel lease—to help streamline the hotel's finances. Ashok Sharma pleaded with Boris not to sign over the lease: with that business in his name Boris had at least some leverage and security. But Boris signed over the lease, saying “Ashok, you're no businessman. You have to be able to

27. Some artifacts from the old Royal Hotel, including Boris's original copper fireplace cover, are in the Yak & Yeti Hotel's Chimney Room restaurant.

trust in business!” According to Sharma, Boris had an unwritten agreement that the new hotel’s profits would be split 50/50. But with no legal claim on the enterprise, Boris was gradually sidelined and reduced to the status of an employee. “Boris never did anything on paper,” said Sharma. “That was the biggest mistake.”

Starting in the mid-1970s Boris began what turned out to be a string of failed attempts to regain his past glory.²⁸ He died “penniless in a public ward at Bir Hospital” (Stephens 1995:172) at age eighty on October 20, 1985, and is buried in the British Cemetery.

Conclusion

People who knew Boris in his later years often have a less than sympathetic view of his role in Nepali tourism. Linked to a series of failed businesses, drinking heavily, telling the same old stories, Boris appears inept and pathetic—at best. Some refuse to concede Boris the title “Father of Nepali Tourism,” pointing out that he never adopted modern hotel management practices. Boris ran a hotel for fifteen years, ran it badly, and ran it into the ground, while others (almost entirely Nepalis) actually grasped what tourism could mean for Nepal and proceeded to build an industry in modern, rational ways.

Yet to fault Boris for not embracing modern tourism practices is to confuse the new conditions of mass tourism that developed in the late 1960s with the tourism that existed during the Royal Hotel’s “golden age.” In 1955 Nepal’s first tourists were elderly elites traveling mainly by boat around the world. Ten years later most tourists were traveling by air. What’s more, by the mid-1960s tourists who made it to Nepal were more and more likely to be middle class and young. The two thousand Westerners who visited Nepal in 1958 were very different people traveling under very different conditions than the forty-five thousand who visited Nepal in the Royal Hotel’s last year (1969). Boris couldn’t have pioneered the forms and practices of modern mass tourism before it actually began.

In fact the end of the Royal marks not just the end of an era for Boris, but for the tourism ethos that he and his hotel embodied. Boris was a product of, and holdout from, the era of Euro-American imperialism and all of the genteel patriarchal privilege (and violence) that it made possible. Boris excelled at making a kind of Raj-like, Oriental/colonial experience

28. Boris even made a cameo appearance in a Saturday Night Live film noir spoof from 1976. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMODtpR9TmE>.

available to elderly postwar elites (especially Americans) who wanted to live some of the Kipling-esque fantasies that they had entertained since youth and could now finally (after 1955) pursue in the at-last-opened “Forbidden Land” of Nepal. What made Boris so brilliant in this role is that he was selling a colonial fantasy that he himself was deeply invested in as a reality: he perfectly acted his part without having to act.

Michel Peissel captures something of what Boris *meant* to early tourists. Like so many others, Peissel was magnetically attracted to Boris because it was *through* Boris that he could tap into

the India and the Asia [Boris] knew so well, the East of my childhood dreams, of tiger shoots and bazaars filled with the political intrigue of maharajas and princes, a world that is rapidly disappearing and being obliterated by Westernization. Boris, I knew, was among the last to hold the key to this Oriental world. (1966:30)

Crucial to note is *which* “Oriental world” Peissel and his era wished to find the key to, and *which* childhood dreams of the East he wanted to enact. By Peissel’s time, what was rapidly disappearing was not a real place but a particular dream Orient linked to the colonial past. By the mid-1960s tourists were bringing with them different fantasies, different childhood dreams, and different imagined Oriental worlds. The Royal Hotel had served an earlier dream paradigm but Boris’s career ended when tourists no longer wished to enter the door to which he held the key.

Jung Bahadur Coapsingha: John Coapman, Hunting, and the Origins of Adventure Tourism in Nepal

By the time I met John Coapman at his home in rural Florida in December 2010 I had already spent more than a decade collecting information on his life and work in India and Nepal during the 1950s and 1960s. Looking at Coapman it was not hard to imagine the huge, intimidating man so many had described—a man known for incredible stamina and tracking skills, for handling the heaviest rifles with ease, and for instantly commanding attention—even though in his eighties he was stooped, walked with a cane, and complained of heart trouble. I was excited to finally meet this famous character from the early years of Nepal tourism: tiger hunter, friend of kings, and pioneer of jungle adventure tourism. But I was also nervous.

From previous correspondence with Coapman, and from stories told by people who had known him through the years, I knew the man I was spending the next twenty-four hours with wasn't just notoriously short-tempered and opinionated, but was known for an inflated self-estimation and a tendency to mythologize—perhaps outright fabricate—his past and accomplishments. Of those left in Nepal who had known Coapman, few expressed friendship and some still grew red-faced with contempt at the thought of him. I was prepared for an irascible old man, but not for the aversion



5 John Coapman, Dec. 2010. Photo by Mark Liechty.

and pity that washed over me as Coapman stared me straight in the eye and told me things I knew to be untrue. I was never sure whether Coapman was cynically manipulating me, or if he genuinely believed the heroic autobio(hagio)graphy he had constructed. I arrived hoping to clear up numerous discrepancies in the story I was writing; I left John Coapman realizing that the myth *was* the story.

Accordingly, John Vernon Coapman grew up in late colonial India where he became an avid hunter, moving in the circles of India's former princely elites who shared his passion for big-game hunting. Through them, Coapman met Nepal's royal family and developed close ties with King Mahendra, another passionate hunter. For decades the two hunted together and Mahendra bestowed upon him the honorific title "Jung Bahadur Coapsingha" in recognition of Coapman's lion-like (*singha*) bravery (*bahadur*). In the late 1950s Mahendra also granted Coapman the right to hunt professionally in the Nepal Tarai, and in the early 1960s designated him the sole administrator of a vast tract of lowland jungle. Coapman was given exclusive proprietary rights over and hunting privileges within this concession in the Chitwan region, an area comprising hundreds of square miles of some of the best tiger habitat in South Asia. From 1958 to 1963 Coapman led wealthy foreign clients on "big-game safaris" in "his jungle," mainly in pursuit of tigers, the ultimate South Asian trophy animal. In the face of dwindling wildlife stocks, in 1963 Coapman abandoned professional hunting and implemented his vision for a new kind of jungle adventure. With wealthy backers, and the king's blessing, Coapman designed, built from scratch, and managed Tiger Tops, an exclusive jungle lodge that was, arguably, the first luxury eco-adventure tourism establishment in the world, and which today remains the standard for high-end tourism destinations in Nepal. Although Tiger Tops was an outstanding resort, its "fatal flaw" was its isolation and the low volume of tourists coming to Nepal in the late 1960s. By the early 1970s Tiger Tops was under pressure from creditors. In January 1972 Coapman's friend and benefactor King Mahendra died while hunting tigers with Coapman near Chitwan. A few months later Coapman left Nepal to set up two similar game resorts in Kenya. Tiger Tops was transferred into the hands of new owner/managers, and John Coapman never again returned to Nepal.

This tale is as frustrating as it is fascinating. Coapman's role as visionary founder and early manager of Tiger Tops is unquestionable. But nearly every other detail in the above account—largely provided to me by Coapman himself—is virtually impossible to verify and openly questioned by detractors. Perhaps the only indisputable thing about John Coapman is that he left behind a trail of acrimony and controversy, a path littered with (what Coapman refers to as) "enemies." This chapter tells the story of John Coapman's pioneering role in a key sector of Nepal's tourism trade. My goal is not to try to separate the man from the myth but to consider Coapman's pursuit of himself *as myth*.

Newly "opened" to the world in 1951, Nepal was a frontier from which some looked forward, eager to propel Nepal into the modern world, while

others looked back to an exotic, romanticized past. For John Coapman Nepal after 1951 was not a promising new Asian democracy but perhaps the last remaining Indian princely state. Like the British earlier, Coapman viewed Nepal as the feudal fiefdom of a ruling royal family, little different from those of the Indian maharajas he hobnobbed and hunted with. But after independence in 1947, princely India had been reduced to a shadow of its former glory. A self-described feudalist, Coapman saw Nepal as the last refuge of feudal statehood in South Asia, a place ruled by a manly native aristocracy, not yet overrun by impotent bureaucrats, or worse, the puffed-up, know-nothing, degree-holding foreign “experts” who challenged his authority. Coapman was attracted to Nepal for what he imagined it *still was*—not for what it *could be*.

Adopting the role of “white hunter,”¹ Coapman embodied a potent colonial myth. Like Kipling’s Kim, Coapman was that impossible, deeply alienated creature: the foreign native. Born of American parents, raised in India, and fluent in numerous Indian languages, Coapman (like Kim) promised his clients (the fantasy of) perfect access to all kinds of natives from the lowliest peasants to native elites. The white hunter transformed the inscrutable and dangerous Orient into an adventure with trophies—a tiger rug or equally awesome photographs. For sale were fantasy adventures full of tigers, perfumed jungles, docile natives, whisky, hunting machismo, and the lifestyles of Oriental rajas (Alter 2000:50). Coapman produced himself as part of the mythic package that he sold.

Early Life

Coapman’s parents were American Presbyterian missionaries in colonial Punjab. Born in 1927,² he spent most of his early years in the Punjabi city of Ambala and Mussoorie, the British Indian “hill station” in the Himalayan foothills north of Delhi. At Mussoorie he attended Woodstock School. High above the heat of the plains, its buildings spread out across a forested mountain side, the Woodstock campus and community was where missionary families retreated, often for large parts of the year. Mussoorie, Woodstock, and the Tehri Garhwal hills became the home base that Coapman returned to nearly every year between 1929 and 1980.

Among Mussoorie’s prime attractions for Coapman was hunting. The

1. The idea of the white hunter—a crack-shot foreign guide with deep local knowledge hired to lead hunting expeditions and protect clients—originated in British East Africa in the early 1900s (Cameron 1990:158–72).

2. John Coapman passed away on August 18, 2013.

wooded mountain slopes stretching hundreds of kilometers to the east, west, and north were full of small game (deer, mountain goats) as well as more exotic animals like leopards and the occasional tiger. Hunting was a common pastime for Indian and expat staff at Woodstock and Coapman acquired his first gun, a 22-calibre rifle, at age six. Already bending rules, as a teenager Coapman registered several rifles with the colonial government, which allowed him to legally keep the guns with him at school while boarding, to the annoyance of school administrators.

Even in an environment where many men and boys hunted, John Coapman soon stood out. From an early age Coapman lived for hunting. As one family friend remembered,

Coapman was the fastest person at Woodstock by far. He would go hunting in the morning to Pepper Pot [a hill about ten kilometers away] and come back in time for school. This was known. He would get up at three or four in the morning, go out and shoot a *ghoral* [a small mountain antelope], and bring it back. All these stories . . . I mean, if you didn't *know* they were true . . . Well, they *are* true!

His size helped: even as a boy Coapman was well on his way to being a truly enormous adult. In his prime he stood around six feet four inches (almost two meters), weighed over three hundred pounds (> 136 kg), had “hands the size of dinner plates,” and was unusually strong. One fellow hunter recalled that for Coapman any gun was small, even the heavy big-game rifles that were difficult to hold in firing position, *especially* after scrambling up a mountainside or through a jungle. Others remember Coapman's phenomenal eyesight, able to spot the speck of a moving animal on a brown hillside hundreds of meters away. His vision, strength, and countless hours of practice meant Coapman shot with amazing accuracy. Later in life even those with nothing positive to say about him were in awe of Coapman's marksmanship.

Coapman's obsession with hunting meant that he spent almost as much of his boyhood in the countryside among Indians as in school with his fellow foreigners. His closest friend was a Garhwali hill man named Dil Das.³ About the same age, they grew up hunting together and remained close friends and hunting companions for forty-five years. Roaming the hills with Dil Das and other Garhwalis Coapman picked up local dialects but also local lore and superstitions surrounding hunting, including making offerings to local spirits related to animals and hunting. Friends re-

3. Joseph Alter, who also grew up at Woodstock, has written a biography of Dil Das in which his relationship with Coapman figures prominently. See Alter 2000.

member Coapman as a thoroughly hybrid individual: a complex mixture of American and Indian yet never fully one or the other.

After graduating from Woodstock School in 1946, Coapman went to college in the US but didn't last long there before returning to India. Through family connections with the owner of Coca-Cola (who supported Presbyterian mission work), Coapman landed his first job in the early 1950s with a Coke distributor in Karachi and later Coca-Cola itself when they established operations on the subcontinent. It's not clear what Coapman's work entailed, but his later claim to have been "CEO of Coca-Cola India" seems unlikely, given this letter from the Coca-Cola Corporation:

We were not particularly satisfied with Mr. Coapman's performances in India and Pakistan. . . . We personally found him to be a most charming individual and a good talker. However, he continually displayed an immaturity which resulted in a failure to perform as well as was considered necessary. . . . [E]fforts to improve his value to our company were unsuccessful. (Gresham and Gresham 1992:37)

Hunting contributed to the failure of Coapman's first job and first marriage. Coapman's Garhwali hunting companion Dil Das recalled how, during his Coke years, Coapman spent every free moment hunting across north India. One Christmas, rather than spending the holidays with his wife and children, as his wife requested, Coapman went hunting with his buddies. Dil Das implies that repeated episodes like this ended Coapman's marriage (Alter 2000:82) and Coke must have felt equally jilted.

Around this time Coapman began seriously contemplating a professional hunting career. Demand for experienced hunting guides was on the rise and few could match Coapman's skills, cultural fluency, and ability to bridge East and West. But Coapman's transition was gradual. Fired by Coke, in 1958 he took a job with the Kellogg Development Corporation of Cleveland, Ohio, but with an interesting twist. His contract allowed him to work for the US firm six months a year, leaving him the other half year to hunt with clients in South Asia. It's not clear when Coapman first worked as a paid hunting guide but in 1958 it became his official part-time business.

One measure of Coapman's seriousness as a hunter is that in his early twenties he became an early adopter of American-made, custom-built, high-powered Weatherby rifles (Gresham and Gresham 1992:36). Compared to other rifles, a Weatherby shot smaller bullets traveling at much greater velocity. Some hunters feared that smaller slugs wouldn't kill large game, but Coapman and others soon showed that a Weatherby rifle—extremely accurate at very long distances—could deliver a well-placed shot

that would bring down just about anything. Coapman corresponded with Roy Weatherby and, when he began his professional guide service, Roy Weatherby referred potential clients.

Coapman's guide business began taking off but his job with Kellogg was less successful. According to the owner of the Kellogg Development Corporation,

John wasn't like an average employee. Your first impression of him is fine, but he is very young and immature in many ways. He seems to have dreams of grandeur, and just can't come down to earth and face reality in the business world. . . . We just couldn't get any effort out of John. He feels he already knows everything and he won't take instructions. (Gresham and Gresham 1992:37)⁴

Fortunately Coapman was able to quit his Kellogg job (before being fired) to take up what must have seemed like a dream job as sales manager at the Weatherby Company headquarters in southern California in August 1961. Again, Coapman negotiated a contract that allowed him to spend part of every year in South Asia pursuing his career as a professional hunter and guide.

Coapman owed his Weatherby job to Herb Klein. A Wisconsin native who made a fortune in the Wyoming oil fields (Klein 1953:ix), Klein became a virtually full-time big-game hunter and by the 1950s was one of the most famous sportsmen in the US, regularly featured in magazines like *Field and Stream*, *Outdoor Life*, and *Sports Afield*. By 1971 *Sports Illustrated* christened Klein "the dean of all big-game hunters in the world today" (Kraft 1971). Combining business and leisure, in the 1940s Klein invested heavily in the struggling Weatherby rifle business, becoming half owner of the firm. It was Roy Weatherby who recommended Coapman when Klein wanted to add the Marco Polo sheep to his trophy collection.⁵ Fluent in Urdu and with ties to the Mir of Hunza, Coapman was one of few Westerners capable of taking clients into the rugged mountains of northern Pakistan where the rare sheep were found. In late 1959 Coapman took Klein into the Pamirs (Klein 1960), and in January 1961 he led Klein on a tiger hunt in Nepal (Klein 1963). Klein praised Coapman's skills at night hunting, calling him "the best I have worked with in my life" (1963:78).

4. This passage, and the one above from Coca-Cola, is from a biography of Roy Weatherby (Gresham and Gresham 1992). I am treating these as excerpts from actual documents acquired by Weatherby who claims to have written directly to Coapman's former employers when he began to doubt Coapman's employment claims. Not having seen the actual letters, these texts need to be treated cautiously. On the other hand, people who knew Coapman well acknowledge that the accounts ring true.

5. In 1964 *Sports Afield* ranked the Marco Polo sheep "the No. 1 trophy of all time" (Delano 1964:83).

Coapman made such a good impression that Klein, with Roy Weatherby's consent, hired Coapman. A big, charismatic professional hunter devoted to Weatherby products—who could be a better salesman than John Coapman?

According to Weatherby, within weeks he knew there were big problems. He found Coapman “headstrong and argumentative” and virtually impossible to work with. Coapman got into “heated arguments” and was insistent on his own views and plans (Gresham and Gresham 1992:37–38). Klein favored giving Coapman the benefit of the doubt but less than four months into the job—with Klein in Africa on safari—Weatherby terminated Coapman's contract,⁶ leading as well to a falling-out between Weatherby and Klein. Citing differences in management styles, in 1962 Weatherby respectfully asked Klein to sell his shares of the company to another investor, which he did at a substantial profit. Managing to retain Klein as a patron, Coapman returned to South Asia to begin his full-time hunting career.

The History of Big-Game Hunting in South Asia

To understand Coapman's career as a professional hunter and guide, it is necessary to look briefly at the emergence of big-game hunting—in South Asia and elsewhere—especially as it pertains to Nepal.

From the days of lion-spearing Assyrian kings onward, killing big, scary animals has been a part of elite culture, often tied to claims of heroic (even godly) powers and authority (Allsen 2006). Yet it is arguably British colonial culture that took this elite obsession to an extreme, turning big-game hunting into a cultlike form of symbolic mastery, masculinity, and conspicuous consumption (Collingham 2001:124). But hunting in colonial South Asia often depended on the cooperation of the Indian “native aristocracy.” Having annexed all of the prime, taxable agricultural land in India for themselves, the British left large tracts of marginal jungle lands as native states ruled by closely controlled (and obsequiously loyal) rajas and nawabs. These princely states, along with government-controlled forest tracts along the southern flanks of the Himalayas, were the subcontinent's prime hunting zones. By the late nineteenth century it was standard practice for Indian princes to bond with their colonial overlords in elaborate hunting parties. These often resulted in almost unbelievable

6. In a 2010 interview Coapman had little to say about the Weatherby episode aside from that Klein had hired him to “run Weatherby” and “get it straightened out” when it was struggling. He told me that he was able to do this in a year and then left.

slaughter as when Viceroy Lord Linlithgow, on a visit to the Maharaja of Bikaner, shot four thousand grouse before lunch (Jaleel 2001:182). But, as Allen points out, “it would be wrong to think of these as sporting occasions: they were an essential part of the rituals of the state, necessary displays of power by princes made largely impotent by the Pax Britannica” (1977:93).

Among the “princes” made impotent by British paramountcy were the Ranas of Nepal who, as a means of defending their tenuous sovereignty vis-à-vis the British, took the ritual of organized hunting to unprecedented extremes. With game stocks dwindling elsewhere, Nepal’s Tarai lowlands acquired almost mythical status among British hunting elites, especially for its tigers. One of the most coveted invitations was from the Rana prime minister to attend one his elaborate winter hunting camps. From the 1870s onward invitee lists read like a who’s-who of British colonial officialdom and royalty including viceroys and kings. From Jung Bahadur onward it was customary for Rana prime ministers to spend the *minpacas*, or fifty coldest days from December through January, hunting in the Tarai (Adhikari 2001:157)—thereby avoiding the cold of Kathmandu while enjoying the best weather in the lowlands when malarial mosquitoes were inactive. More than just social occasions, hunting parties with British guests allowed Nepalis to accomplish diplomatic objectives (Cox 2010) without needing to allow ritually contaminating foreigners into the Kathmandu Valley (Liechty 1997).

Jung Bahadur Rana was the first to organize large-scale hunting parties, spending thirty-one seasons in the Tarai and dispatching over 550 tigers (Smythies 1942:38). He is also credited with inventing the “Nepal Ring Method” using hundreds of people and elephants to encircle game.⁷ After luring tigers into a designated area with staked buffalo calves, vast strings of three hundred or more elephants would set off to form a ring around several square miles. On command, elephant drivers would direct their animals inward, driving game into a smaller and smaller area. On their own elephants, the shooting party would then proceed into the “ring,” attempting to flush and shoot tigers. Frequently several, even up to six, tigers would be trapped in one ring.⁸ “The danger and heart-bursting excitement may continue for hours, until a succession of well-placed shots

7. Using elephants may have been new but the ring method, using large numbers of people, dates back to at least the Mongol era (Prawdin (2006:184–85) and was also used in Ming China (Dryer 2007:151).

8. Juddha SJB Rana further perfected the ring method by having bearers erect “walls” of cloth hung on poles and stretched around the inner ring. The walls fooled most animals into thinking they were trapped, allowing the elephants to go off and constrict another ring while the raja was shooting in the first. In this way Juddha could enjoy six or seven rings per day (Smythies 1942:44).

finally brings the thrill and nerve-tension to an end” (Smythies 1942:42; cf. Morden 1929).

Interestingly, Jung Bahadur’s innovations in Nepal parallel a similar shift from hunting to “shooting” taking place among European elites. The origins of “driven shooting” date to around 1860. “Previously gentlemen had walked through woods and shot pheasants as they flew away. Now it was the estate workers who did the walking, driving the pheasants towards the gentlemen” (Ruffer 1977:11). Many British elites transformed their rural estates into shooting venues, raising thousands of game birds and employing hundreds of beaters. At the “big shoots” invited “big shots” could wreak unprecedented carnage. Lord Ripon⁹ held the record of twenty-eight pheasants shot in one minute (Ruffer 1977:46). He kept detailed tallies according to which between 1867 and 1923 he killed 556,813 animals (including nine tigers and two rhinos shot in Nepal while a guest of the Ranas) (Ruffer 1977:135). Whether with Jung Bahadur’s “ring method” or the British craze for “driven shooting,” there was a growing worldwide connection between elite privilege and these massive, expensive, labor-intensive hunting spectacles. For elites, “the organized shoot was ideal—its pleasures were admirably exclusive and wonderfully extravagant” (Ruffer 1977:11).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries no one put on a bigger “big shoot” or offered a more spectacular hunting “bag” than the Ranas of Nepal. In 1876 Jung Bahadur hosted Prince Edward and in 1890 Bhir SJB Rana hosted Crown Prince Albert Victor. In 1911 Chandra SJB Rana hosted George V who, after his Imperial Coronation Durbar in Delhi, departed posthaste to Nepal for the biggest “big shoot” ever. Chandra constructed a huge luxury tent city for the king and his entourage (excluding Queen Mary, left to mull in Agra) and assembled a record herd of 645 elephants to ring game. In ten days the king alone shot twenty-one tigers, eight rhinos, and innumerable other animals (Fortescue 1912:201). Visits by royalty and other dignitaries continued apace for the coming decades (see, e.g., Ellison 1925), each occasioning widespread press coverage, making Nepal the most sought-after hunting destination in the world. In the early 1940s one British official penned a veritable hymn to Nepal’s famed Chitwan jungles:

Chitawan! the famous big game reserve of Nepal and one of the most beautiful places in the world. Chitawan! an area of mystery and romance, known by repute to many white men, but seen by so few. Chitawan! a name synonymous (to those who know)

9. The Second Marquess of Ripon, son of the First Marquess, Viceroy of India in the 1870s.

with the acme of big game shooting, reserved for the sport of the Maharaja and his distinguished guests, an Emperor, a Prince, a Viceroy. (Smythies 1942:80)

Less than two decades later Chitwan had become John Coapman's exclusive hunting preserve.

By the 1940s it was clear to the Ranas that British power on the subcontinent was waning and their own political future was in jeopardy. With the Tarai long having served as a kind of interface between Nepali elites and world powers, the Ranas began rethinking the role of big game diplomacy in a changing world. With their noses testing the shifting political winds, the Ranas began opening the Tarai to a new global elite, namely, rich Americans. Already in the 1920s the Ranas had started making money off of Nepal's wildlife¹⁰ but by the 1930s the seeds of the idea that hunting itself could be a moneymaker for Nepali elites seem to have been planted.

The link between Prime Minister Juddha SJB Rana and American "white hunter" Charles Cottar is evidence of this new direction. Having moved to British East Africa in 1910 to pursue his passion for big-game hunting, in 1919 Cottar established "Cottar's Safari Service." It was so successful that he began leading hunts elsewhere, including Nepal. There, according to Herne (1999:108), "His friend the Maharajah of Nepal even made his palace available to the Cottars and their clients for tiger shoots." Herne cites unpublished Cottar family documents but I was able to confirm the gist of his claims in a personal communication with Calvin Cottar, Charles's great-grandson and current owner of Cottar's Safari Service in Kenya.¹¹ Not only does this make Charles Cottar the first white hunter to operate in Nepal, it also suggests that the Ranas had opened the Nepal Tarai to rich Americans for commercial hunting in the 1930s. In 1947 Rana officials talked openly with American diplomats about promoting "a high-class tourist trade for tiger hunting" (*Time* 1947).¹² The nexus between tourism, tigers, and rich Americans was well-established in the minds of Nepali elites in the decades before John Coapman finally brought them together with the establishment of Tiger Tops in the 1960s.

10. For example, in 1922 Kaiser SJB Rana sold two Asian rhinos to an American zoo buyer for 35,000 rupees or 12,600 dollars—a substantial amount at the time (Buck 1930:55). The Ranas also started the disastrous policy of selling rhino horn to Chinese buyers "for medicinal uses" (Buck 1930: text on plate opposite p. 57).

11. Cottar reports having "lots of old cine 35 mm film" of his grandfather's trips to Nepal in the 1930s. Charles Cottar died in 1940, gored by an African rhino (Herne 1999:108).

12. In his own public account of the mission, Satterthwaite mentions big-game hunting as a topic of discussion with the Ranas, describing it as Nepal's "national sport" (1947:38), but does not explicitly mention having discussed hunting tourism.

Out of Africa

To understand the post–World War II, American-led boom in big-game hunting we need to take a brief detour back to Africa. That the first white hunter in Nepal (Charles Cottar) was American and had arrived via Africa is no coincidence. As the US gradually replaced Britain as the global hegemon, Americans increasingly took up “the white man’s burden” of colonialism along with imperial pastimes like big-game hunting. Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919), arguably the first US president to embrace America’s imperial destiny, was also an inveterate big-game hunter. Following in the footsteps of British royalty, after leaving the presidency in March 1909 Roosevelt set out on an enormous safari to British East Africa. Though not the first American to hunt in Africa, Roosevelt’s widely publicized shooting of elephants, rhinos, lions, and leopards captured the public’s imagination and fed American fantasies of colonial machismo. Inspired by Roosevelt, in 1910 Charles Cottar went to Africa to hunt and soon made a career out of leading fabulously rich American tycoons and movie stars in search of big game. A young Ernest Hemingway pored over Roosevelt’s 1910 safari memoir, *African Game Trails*, entranced by stories of close encounters with “the most dangerous of the world’s big game” (Roosevelt 1934 [1910]:7).¹³ During his own much-publicized safari in 1934, Hemingway intentionally hired the same white hunter that had guided Roosevelt (Ondaatje 2004:23), and was aware of walking in the footsteps of British royalty (Hemingway 1963 [1935]:142). If Roosevelt’s safari “persuaded many wealthy sportsmen from around the world to try their hand at big-game hunting” (Ondaatje 2004:45), Hemingway’s African safari (and the books, short stories, and Hollywood film adaptations that came from it) fixed an indelible image of African hunting machismo in the American popular imagination.¹⁴

Yet what colonialism made possible, decolonization spelled an end to. With the loss of India—Britain’s “Jewel in the Crown”—to independence in 1947, other gems soon fell, including British East African colonies where violent antiforeign, anticolonial movements made an African safari a much less pleasant prospect for rich Americans. It is in this context that Nepal, newly opened but still a more-or-less feudal state with a quasi-

13. Roosevelt describes native African culture as equivalent to “Europe in the late Pleistocene” (1937 [1910]:3). He has nothing but admiration for the British and German colonials he encounters and there is not the faintest hint of any critique of colonial rule.

14. Hemingway’s nonfiction account of his safari, *Green Hills of Africa* (1935), had a huge impact on Western “sporting culture,” laying a blueprint for American fantasies of manly adventure and quasi-colonial mastery: the white bwanas and their sage white hunter engaged in manly competition, tossing back whisky in the cool of their tented camps, eagerly served by throngs of admiring natives.

colonial ethos, began attracting the attention of hunting elites in search of an authentic mythical experience.

John Coapman and Professional Hunting in Nepal

By the time Coapman registered his firm Royal Nepal Shikar in Kathmandu in 1958 he was already leading clients in India and Pakistan. But Britain's departure from India also ended laws that had kept guns out of Indian hands, reserved hunting for elites, and protected wildlife habitat (Byrne 2001:81). After 1947 Indians set up hunting firms that advertised in US magazines promising "Tiger Guaranteed" or "No Tiger, No Fee" (Jaleel 2001:183). With wildlife stocks rapidly dwindling in India, Nepal was seen as the last South Asian region with relatively intact jungle ecosystems and big-game hunting potential. Already famous in big-game hunting circles, the Tarai region's reputation continued to grow once Nepal opened to foreigners. For wealthy hunters in search of a tiger skin, Coapman provided a valuable service and access to an otherwise inaccessible place.

Nepal tourism began slowly in the early 1950s but from the start guidebooks promoted big-game hunting as a "note-worthy" activity (Poudyal 1955:2). Han Suyin's (albeit fictionalized) account mentions wealthy Americans on Tarai hunting safaris in the mid-1950s (Han 1973 [1958]:143). A 1960 Royal Nepal Academy tourist pamphlet describes particular fauna as being "of great attraction to hunters" (RNA 1960:12). The most enthusiastic pitch for Nepal hunting tourism is in a 1959 guidebook.

Nepal affords a variety of wild animals in the annals of big game that are unique in the world of shikar trophies, and can rightly claim to be the best hunting grounds of the universe. It has, perhaps, the most celebrated reserves, for herein distinguished guests from all over the world have partaken of the privileges. (Elliott 1959:108)

John Coapman claimed to be the first foreigner to register a hunting business in Nepal but in fact that distinction goes to Peter Byrne, another self-described white hunter. Irish by birth, Byrne served with the British Royal Air Force in South East Asia during World War II. Following the war he joined a tea company in northern Bengal where he worked from 1948 to 1953. Relatively unencumbered with work, Byrne spent much of his time walking the hills, honing his hunting skills, and eventually contemplating a career as a professional hunting guide. On weekends the company flew their tea to Calcutta and it was there that Byrne met Nepal's

Prince Basundhara, brother of King (then Crown Prince) Mahendra. “I met him in the Casanova Bar in the Grand Hotel,” said Byrne. “When I was a planter we’d fly down for weekends. All the tea gardens shipped from Calcutta. So that’s how I met Basundhara. The Grand Hotel—we all stayed there.”¹⁵

Byrne and Basundhara hit it off and when the prince learned of Byrne’s hunting dreams, he offered to help get him licensed for hunting in Nepal. In 1953 Byrne *walked* from Darjeeling to Kathmandu (2001:147) where he met Basundhara.

So Basundhara, he needed someone to write a permit. But of course there was no Department of Wildlife. So he sent for the Foreign Secretary. . . . Basundhara told him [the Secretary], “Write something down for Peter and get it stamped and signed.” So the document I have, which is framed at home, is written by the Foreign Secretary, to allow me to hunt for ten years and to be renewed after ten years. . . . There was no department at that time. There was barely a government.¹⁶

Along with the permit Byrne received a Tarai hunting concession located in the farthest reaches of western Nepal (2001:145). Because the area, known as *Sukla Phanta* (or the White Grass Plains) was closer to Delhi than Kathmandu, Byrne operated his business from the Indian capital only ten hours away by road. Starting with advertisements in US magazines like *Field and Stream* and *Outdoor Life* (Byrne 2001:157), Byrne built up a clientele of “mostly rich Americans: Californians and Texans.”

Although it now seems stranger than fiction, in 1957 Byrne met Tom Slick, the eccentric Texas millionaire with an obsession for “cryptozoology” (see chapter 3). On Tenzing Norgay’s recommendation, Slick hired Byrne and his brother to hunt for the Abominable Snowman in the high country of the eastern Nepal. “So we spent three years, coming down at Christmastime, staying in hotels, whooping it up for a week, and going back.” With no luck in the Himalayas, on his annual visit to Kathmandu in 1960 Byrne got a cable from Slick asking him to come to the American northwest to search for “Bigfoot.” That project lasted until 1962 when Slick

15. In his book Byrne (2001:138–45) describes this meeting with Basundhara in more fascinating detail. There he tells of coming to the aid of a small, dapper South Asian gentleman who was picked on by a drunken European bully at the bar. After punching the drunk and having him dragged off by hotel security, Byrne learned that the stranger was a Nepali prince! Indebted to Byrne, Basundhara invited him to visit Nepal and offered his assistance.

16. Given that ministries did not exist when Byrne received his documentation, Coapman’s claim to have registered the “first professional hunting company via official Govt. of Nepal Ministries of Forest and Industries” may be true.

was killed in a plane crash and his heirs pulled the plug on his eccentric projects, according to Byrne, “literally overnight.”¹⁷

Because Byrne’s hunting business had been on hold for five years after 1957, he was unaware of John Coapman’s entry onto the scene in Nepal. The two first met by coincidence during Coapman’s brief stint at Weatherby headquarters in southern California where Byrne went to visit Herb Klein in 1961. After a pleasant lunch, Klein told Byrne, “I’d like you to meet one of my managers.”

So Klein left and Coapman and I sat down and had some coffee together and we talked, or at least *he* talked. And he told me that that he was a hunter in Nepal. He said he had been hunting there many years and he said that his specialty was man-eating tigers. Whenever there was a man-eater, the king sent specially for him. He had permission from Herb Klein to leave the factory at any time and go to Nepal and hunt a man-eater. I asked how many he had shot to this date, and he said, “Oh, seven or eight”—as if you wouldn’t remember how many. So he went on and on and on about his association with the king, and his many safaris, western Nepal, eastern Nepal. And then time came and we were standing up and he asked, “So what do you do?” and I said, “Well, I’m a pro hunter in Nepal—15 years.” He looked at me. And then he walked away.

I made a terrible enemy of him because I bluffed him. And he came out here [to Kathmandu] and he bad-mouthed me back and forth all over the place. But a lot of people quickly saw through him. He’s a phony, a complete phony.

When I told him something of Coapman’s version of the story, Byrne insisted “Coapman never had a license here, no. Coapman was a complete fraud. . . . I don’t think he ever hunted.”

Perhaps what rankled Coapman’s acquaintances more than anything was his claim to intimacy with Nepal’s royal family, especially King Mahendra. Coapman claimed he was introduced to Nepali royals by Indian princes related by marriage. Jim Edwards, who later played a major role at Tiger Tops, spoke contemptuously about Coapman’s ties with the palace.

You’d be sitting having a cup of tea at the Royal [Hotel in Kathmandu] and Coapman would drive up and the first thing he’d say is, “Oh, I’ve just had tea with the king, I don’t need any.” Things like that, all the time. Several times the king wasn’t even in the country and Coapman would have had dinner with him.

17. Loren Coleman (1989) documents Byrne’s relationship with Slick, and Byrne (1975) documents his own adventures with “Bigfoot.”

In 1963 Edwards teamed up with Charles McDougal in their own professional hunting business, Nepal Wildlife Adventure, with McDougal as hunter and naturalist, and Edwards as publicist and manager. Unlike Peter Byrne, who dismissed any and all of Coapman's claims, Edwards acknowledged that Coapman had a reputation for being an excellent hunter and was making good money guiding wealthy clients. But as for Coapman's claims of being close to the king, that was "bullshit."

I pressed both Byrne and Edwards to explain how, if Coapman *did not* have strong ties with Mahendra, he managed in 1963 to acquire rights to the famous Chitwan hunting tracts controlled by the royal family. All Peter Byrne could say was that Coapman blustered his way into it.

He was a talker. He was a hell of a talker. He was a man who exuded enormous confidence. He was very big. He had people jumping all over the place, but it was all lies. Oh, he could talk to people. He had a great presence.

Jim Edwards finally conceded that Coapman must have had ties to Mahendra.

Look, in the long run, Mark, if he was a friend of King Mahendra, great. Why not? I mean he could have been. I mean I'm sure that Coapman met him a couple of times. . . . So it might have been from Mahendra. I mean, I wouldn't know how else he got permission. . . . I mean he couldn't just walk into the king's house [and demand such a thing].

Coapman and Mahendra likely formed a relationship around a shared a love of hunting. Mahendra collected big-game trophies and may have hired Coapman even before 1958: many South Asian elites did, from the Raja of Kotah to Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (Alter 2000:82). Mahendra hired other professional guides: he hunted lions in Africa (Kraft 1965) and grizzly and polar bears in Alaska¹⁸ (Hutchins 2007:14). Like his Rana predecessors, Mahendra mounted massive cool-season hunting parties in the Tarai, one of which was written up in great detail in *Sports Illustrated* (Kraft 1965). On an official visit to the US in 1960 Mahendra went out of his way to visit the Weatherby rifle company's headquarters. A photo taken at the factory shows the usually morose Mahendra holding a Weatherby rifle with the closest thing to a smile that I have ever seen captured on film (Gresham and Gresham 1992:62). Even a photo

18. A massive polar bear rug (dotted with mothballs) still dominates the grand reception hall of Kathmandu's former royal palace, now a public museum. There are also dozens of other aging big-game trophies on display.

op with Elvis Presley didn't elicit the pleasure of talking guns with Roy Weatherby.¹⁹ Was Coapman responsible for Mahendra's love of Weatherby rifles? Was it mere coincidence that Weatherby hired Coapman within a year of the king's visit? All I can say is that I failed to find mention of Coapman in any reference concerning Mahendra and hunting.

Founding Tiger Tops

Tiger hunting in Nepal wasn't officially banned until after Mahendra's death in 1972, but already by the early 1960s signs of big-game hunting's demise were evident. Perhaps most telling was an incident during Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip's official visit to Nepal in February 1961 when Mahendra mounted the last of the lavish Tarai hunting parties in their honor. Faced with a century of royal precedent, Prince Philip was in a quandary. A prominent member of several UK-based wildlife conservation organizations, Philip could neither turn down Mahendra's invitation nor be seen killing endangered animals. As Peissel reports, "Newspapers in England openly attacked the royal party for participating in a shoot that not only was cruel and outmoded but that also taxed the budget of a small, underdeveloped country" (1966:257–58). Briton's royals flew to Chitwan but on the morning of the big shoot Prince Philip arrived at breakfast sporting a large bandage on his trigger finger, the result of a mysterious accident the night before (Peissel 1966:258)! While Mahendra hunted, Elizabeth shot photos and Philip convalesced while enjoying a tour of the area on elephant back.

As the era of environmental consciousness began to dawn, the days of sport hunting were numbered. In fact some of the first to exchange guns for cameras were hunters themselves, aware of what rising human populations and habitat loss meant for the viability of wildlife stocks. Already in the 1930s legendary tiger slayer Jim Corbett had given up sport hunting for photography.²⁰ "The taking of a good photograph gives far more pleasure to the sportsman than the acquisition of a trophy," said Corbett (1991 [1944]:236). When Corbett moved to British Kenya in 1947 he set up Tree Tops—a game-*viewing* lodge, not a hunting business.

19. See the photo of Elvis and Mahendra on the Wikipedia entry for "Mahendra of Nepal."

20. Corbett (1875–1955) grew up near Mussoorie a generation before Coapman and became world-famous for stalking man-eating tigers which he described in his best-selling *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (1944) (later a Hollywood movie [Jaleel 2001]). Corbett was also a pioneering conservationist (Booth 1991 [1986]:181) and a leading force behind passage of the 1935 Indian Wildlife Protection Act. Today a huge Indian national park is named after Corbett, a rare honor for a British colonial.

Even so, the allure of big-game hunting was still strong, especially for nouveau riche Americans who, eager to inherit the colonial pleasures of the erstwhile British, continued to shoot trophies in Africa. Hemingway took a second well-publicized safari in 1953. Movie star William Holden was so smitten with African hunting that, with the help of American oil billionaire Ray Ryan, in 1959 he purchased a huge colonial estate and established the Mount Kenya Safari Club (MKSC). Now a fancy resort, the MKSC was originally an exclusive club and (according to its website) a “Mecca for the international jet set” with a member list that read “like a Who’s Who of royalty, aristocracy, and the rich and famous” including Ernest Hemingway, Bing Crosby, Conrad Hilton, and Winston Churchill.

Two names notably absent from MKSC’s member roles were Herb Klein (the oilman hunter associated with Weatherby rifles) and his hunting companion Toddie Lee Wynne. Leading members of the Houston-based Shikar Safari Club, Klein and Wynne had applied for membership only to be turned down because, according to Jim Edwards, “there were too many Texans.” Still stinging from this humiliation, in 1960 Klein met Coapman to discuss ideas for a club/resort in Asia. By the fall of 1961 (after Weatherby fired Coapman) Klein, Wynne, and Coapman were in Kathmandu wining and dining with the royals.

Toddie Lee Wynne (1896–1982) epitomized the vulgar but shrewd ultra-rich Texas oilman. The owner of American Liberty Oil Company, he lived in a vast pastel-pink mansion in Dallas, was a co-owner of the Dallas Cowboys football team, and vacationed on his private island in the Gulf of Mexico. Already rich from oil, he amassed further fortunes as a real estate developer in Texas and overseas. A June 20, 1960, *Time* magazine article describes Wynne’s 2.48 million dollar investment (a fortune at that time) in prime Hong Kong property where he erected a twenty-five-story Hilton hotel. That hotel and another in Bali were phenomenally profitable, earning Wynne a reputation as a savvy maverick investor. In comparison, the project Wynne and Klein dreamed up with John Coapman in Nepal must have seemed like a minor amusement. Klein and Wynne agreed to put up one hundred thousand dollars and make Coapman managing director of the proposed jungle lodge.²¹

Coapman had begun sketching plans for a resort in the early 1960s and it was probably images like these that stoked Klein and Wynne’s own dreams of a quasi-private hunting resort on the Tarai, sour-grapes com-

21. According to Coapman, Klein and Wynne were 50 percent shareholders and he held the other half. But according to Jim Edwards, who claimed to have seen the original documents, Coapman’s ownership of half the company’s shares was made contingent upon his repaying the original hundred thousand dollar investment, something he never accomplished.

pensation for membership in the African club. Coapman also realized that it was time to get out of hunting.

I stopped hunting professionally in 1963 because big game hunting in Asia was coming to a close, not because of serious hunters, but because of poachers, population explosion, destruction of mountain and jungle forests by human pressure, and forest cutting. I knew tourism and photography were the only possible future for me. I also preferred the wild animals over my clients who were mainly poor hunters. (Personal correspondence, 7/15/2004)

Coapman was also clearly inspired by Jim Corbett who had already shifted to low-impact wildlife tourism in Africa a decade earlier. “When I came up with the name Tigertops [*sic*] I was thinking Tree Tops for Kenya and Tigertops for Nepal,” said Coapman (personal correspondence, 4/21/2008). Though not well-known today, in the 1950s and 1960s Corbett’s Tree Tops was famous²² and the link between the two names was clearly understood at the time²³ and a savvy decision.

By the time Jim Edwards arrived in Kathmandu in May 1962 Coapman was talking up his new ideas.

Boris introduced me to [Coapman] and he was telling about some grandiose scheme where he was going to take over the whole of Nepal’s wildlife for the government, and the king was his best friend. Complete bullshit. He was going to take the whole of Nepal’s wildlife and turn it into Africa—like with wildlife lodges and that kind of thing, safari parks. He was going to be asked by the government to manage them. And when I heard that I was quite pleased. . . . I was glad someone had the guts to even try it because Nepal wasn’t easy in those days . . . unless you were actually royal, or had royal contacts, which we *all* did. Coapman knew everybody in town. I knew everybody in town. Boris knew everybody in town. So it wasn’t a secret that you knew people. You either knew people or you didn’t. Frankly, you either knew people or you didn’t exist.

Important here is the Africa connection: Coapman envisioned a system of safari parks and lodges similar to those already established in Kenya and Tanzania. Government approval suggests that Mahendra himself likely

22. In 1952 Tree Tops scored a public relations coup when then Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip visited the resort. While the royals were in their “tree top” game viewing platform on the night of February 5th, King George VI died, leaving Elizabeth the defacto queen. Corbett joked that “for the first time in the history of the world a young girl climbed into a tree one day a Princess and . . . climbed down from the tree the next day a Queen” (Booth 1991 [1986]:249)! News of Tree Tops spread round the world.

23. E.g., see Simpson 1976 [1967]:97.

embraced this Africa-inspired vision of nonhunting tourism.²⁴ Coapman registered Tiger Tops in Dallas and also with the Nepal government making Tiger Tops the first foreign firm ever registered in Nepal, a fact confirmed by others.

Coapman built Tiger Tops with what one later employee called an “African feel.” Not only were the first buildings erected on tall stilts (as at Tree Tops) but some were designed in “rondoal” style—the round, conical-roofed huts that originated in Africa but are now popular in resorts worldwide. Perhaps inspired by Boris’s Yak & Yeti Bar, Coapman also installed a large circular fireplace with an overhanging chimney in the main dining/lounge building. Most important, though, was the resort’s location, on a north-facing bank above one of the channels of the Rapti River. Photos taken looking north show the blue Rapti in the foreground, green jungle stretching toward dark foothills, and the stunning white peaks of the Annapurna massif spanning the horizon, under a clear blue sky. Even Coapman’s detractors call his citing “brilliant.”

Using carpenters and pit sawyers from Bihar and stone masons from Kathmandu, Coapman built Tiger Tops using entirely local materials. The lodge opened with just four guest rooms in 1964. Visitors arrived by plane, using the landing strip constructed for Queen Elizabeth’s Tarai adventure a few years earlier (Kunwar 2002:83). There they were met by elephants that carried them through the jungle to the lodge (McDonald 2005:116).

A key part of Coapman’s agreement with Mahendra was the Chitwan concession. But the *size* of that concession, and the *nature* of Coapman’s control over it, are unclear. According to Coapman, “I was given tour, construction, and control rights for all the jungle south of the Rapti River, west to the Narianyi [*sic*] River and south to the Nepal-Bihar border and east some 20 miles up the Rapti River—a very vast area” (personal correspondence, 7/15/2004). This is indeed a vast area (thousands of square kilometers), much larger than the current Chitwan National Park (932 sq. km) for which the Tiger Tops concession served as the basis. Jim Edwards claimed that Coapman was only authorized to operate within a five-mile radius of the Tiger Tops lodge. According to Edwards, when he and McDougal led clients on hunts in the Chitwan area, Coapman “sent his men to cut our baits free when we were baiting for tiger. Coapman was that kind of a man—an all or nothing egotist. He considered it encroachment on ‘his territory’ which of course it wasn’t.”

Also controversial were some of Coapman’s management decisions.

24. Mahendra continued to hunt tigers for the rest of his life but by 1970 even he was considering a total hunting ban (Gammon 1970).

One was the use of what is now called “prescribed fire,” the seasonal burning off of dead grasses and fallen timber to promote more fresh growth and better grazing, and to reduce the likelihood of wildfires. Prescribed fire is now a standard ecological management practice but in the early 1960s it was controversial. Coapman also banned the use of DDT across his concession, “making USAID and UN mad at me”²⁵ but making him ahead of his time in recognizing DDT’s environmental impact. Perhaps most controversial was Coapman’s drive to remove large numbers²⁶ of “squatters” from “my jungle area.” Ultimately it was Mahendra who gave the eviction orders while also opening up other lands for displaced people. According to Coapman, with people in the area it would have been impossible to control poaching, wildlife would have disappeared, and there would have been nothing left from which to create the eventual Chitwan National Park.

By 1966 Tiger Tops had eight guest rooms and business was brisk enough that Coapman decided to hire someone in Kathmandu to handle reservations and inquiries. Curiously, Coapman chose Elizabeth Hawley, an American expat working as a Time-Life and Reuters correspondent (McDonald 2005). Known for her prickly demeanor, short fuse, and low tolerance for BS, conflict between Hawley and Coapman was inevitable. Nevertheless, Hawley became the Kathmandu face of the operation or, as one reporter called her, “the *eminence grise* of the Tiger Tops Hotel” (Bernstein 1970:8).

Coapman at Tiger Tops

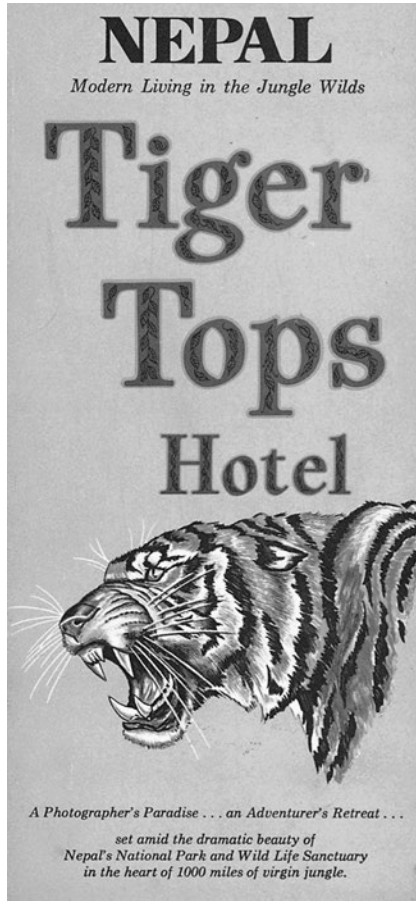
I tell you, John sahib has done many things, but nothing to compare with Tiger Tops.

DIL DAS (IN ALTER 2000:76)

Tiger Tops was John Coapman’s crowning achievement. With local craftsman, he literally materialized the luxury wildlife resort out of the trees and stones of the forest. But if Coapman could bring big ideas to life, he had trouble sustaining them. Depending on how one knew him, Coapman was either a visionary and dynamic entrepreneur, or a hopeless manager of money and people. As one acquaintance succinctly put it, “Coapman was a man you either loved or hated.” Similarly, in our cor-

25. In 1954 the US began an aggressive mosquito eradication program to help open the Tarai to agricultural settlement. By 1962 the disease was effectively suppressed (Mihaly 2002 [1965]:42, 152).

26. Coapman’s claim of 157,000 people is probably a wild exaggeration but there is no doubt that some indigenous people and other recent settlers were expelled.



6 Tiger Tops brochure, ca. 1970.

respondence, Coapman seemed to divide a lifetime of acquaintances into “friends” and “enemies.”

Coapman’s black-and-white worldview was perhaps the secret to both his success and failure. He cultivated a larger-than-life persona of almost mythic proportions. “He was a very charismatic character,” recalled one person. “When he walked in a room he filled the room, literally and figuratively.” As former employers, friends, and detractors all observed, Coapman was a big talker. He had “a reputation for speaking his mind in four-letter words.” In a group, “there was no one to match his ability to tell a story or carry a conversation. When Coapman spoke . . . everyone listened, both because they were drawn in by the power of his narrative and

because he would not tolerate distractions, interruptions, or criticism” (Alter 2000:51, 52). Another longtime Kathmandu expat recalled, “We used to call him The Rhino, because he was *very*, you know . . . [narrows eyes, snorts aggressively, swings head side to side—laughter]. You didn’t want him to come at you with his head lowered!” Coapman wanted not just respect from those he met, but a kind of reverential awe. In brief relationships with hunting clients or guests at Tiger Tops, Coapman often found a receptive audience. But in more sustained dealings, few put up with his posturing for long.

Certainly the patron/client dynamic facilitated Coapman’s performance as an awe-inspiring white hunter. A rich foreigner walking the jungle trails with Coapman *wanted* to believe his stories, not only to get his money’s worth but because Coapman seemed to be the main thing standing between the client and mortal danger. The role of brave guide/leader that Coapman wanted to play actually required a subordinate: in the liminal jungle world many were willing to pay for the privilege, and thrill, of literally walking in Coapman’s shadow.

Indeed Coapman intentionally portrayed the area surrounding Tiger Tops as a danger zone and himself as protector. Whereas Corbett had put Tree Tops on stilts because of hippos in the nearby watering hole, Coapman’s decision was apparently for effect. With no hippos or animals that would attack a person in a building,²⁷ Coapman might as well have built on the ground. Said one person, Coapman “would go around with a rifle slung over his shoulder all the time and all the other men carried huge sticks to fend off marauding wildlife and it was all sort of, gung-ho, and sort of *Jungle Book* stuff. He had it [Tiger Tops] as a kind of ego trip, John Coapman did.” Another remembered how Coapman “used to go around with a rifle, shooting off all the time to scare the tigers away from the guests—the jeopardy factor. They do that in Africa a lot. That was all part of the show.” One visitor described a jungle walk he took with Coapman. On the way back to the lodge Coapman pointed to tiger tracks on the trail and said they had been stalked. Forty years later this visitor had vivid memories of that perilous jungle walk though now he wonders if Coapman’s comments were merely for effect. One of my favorite descriptions of Coapman regards knives: “He could throw a knife and make it stick into that plant [pointing to a small tree fifteen feet away] without it touching anything else. Thhhhhhhhhunk!” It was this attention to flamboyant detail that made Coapman a compelling, commanding character, like some-

27. As Byrne (2001:254) and Corbett (1944) both note, leopards are the exception to this rule. Man-eating leopards were much more feared than man-eating tigers because the leopards would break down doors and drag victims off while tigers would only wait in the jungle.

thing out of a Hollywood adventure film.²⁸ To be sure, part of his appeal rested on decades of jungle experience. Even Jim Edwards, whose dislike for Coapman was vehemently reciprocated, acknowledged that Coapman “was a gifted naturalist—gifted. He could smell a tiger miles away.” Still, much of the Tiger Tops mystique was built from Coapman’s talent for constructing a client’s visit as a dramatic experience.

Like any drama, Coapman’s Tiger Tops was based on a script he shared with his elite clients. Coapman’s special talent was in bringing a mythologized colonial adventure to life.

What made Tiger Tops successful . . . was not just the abundance of wild animals, but the exotic disjuncture of elite, postcolonial taste—soft pillows, cool drinks, comfortable chairs, old scotch whiskey, and fine dining—with the untamed, wild, and potentially dangerous environment of uncivilized Asia. To a degree, Tiger Tops re-created the colonial adventure in microcosm. . . . In this context, Coapman provided the persona of a real-life adventurer.

Coapman, scotch in hand . . . would enchant his clients with tales of fantastic, dangerous adventure. One was never quite sure if Coapman was ever really telling the truth about anything, and yet there was always enough which was believable in his narrative to make one think that his fantastic experiences might just have happened. (Alter 2000:51)

Coapman made himself a key part of the mythic adventure he sold. Yet at some point Coapman could no longer distinguish himself from the fabrications increasingly needed to spin his mythical narrative.

This is not to say that there were no real adventures or dangers at Tiger Tops. Dil Das, Coapman’s childhood friend and hunting companion from India, worked as a guide at Tiger Tops. “I led tours, told people what to do, and showed people animals.” “My job was simply to make those who had come to the park happy” (Alter 2000:72, 76). Dil Das describes one occasion when a group of tigers stood in the path and roared aggressively as a group of terrified Japanese tourists cowered behind him. Armed only with a stick and a *khukuri* (a Nepali knife), Dil Das stood his ground. “I held onto the *khukuri* firmly while the others . . . stood behind me. I told them to stand quietly. The tigers growled a lot. . . . The tigers ran into this

28. In fact Coapman does make a kind of appearance in a popular film, though one from France. The 1969 André Cayatte film *Les chemins de Katmandou* features a villainous American big-game hunter that Coapman acknowledged, with some pride, was modeled after himself. Cayatte describes meeting an American hunting guide in Kathmandu in the late 1960s on whom he based the film’s villain. “Indeed there I met, in the flesh, the character of the father: an American who earned his living by organizing tiger hunts, a man in his forties but with a mental age of eighteen, charming, carefree, casual.” See <http://barjaweb.free.fr/SITE/ecrits/Katmandou/katmandou.html>.

grass and hid, and we had to go in after them. I pissed in my pants I was so scared” (Alter 2000:74). Dil Das also described how when wild elephants showed up it was the job of Champa Kali—a big, tame, tusked female camp elephant used for jungle tours—to scare them off. “They sharpened her tusks and would give her four bottles of liquor to drink. I would tell her, ‘Champa Kali, leave some for me!’ She would leave me half a bottle to drink!” (Alter 2000:76). Drunk, her handlers would send Champa Kali (likewise drunk) out to drive away the wild elephants.²⁹

At Tiger Tops Coapman continued to benefit from royal patronage. Coapman noted that “King Mahendra and his three sons came to Tigertops [*sic*] several times and Prince Basundhara [Mahendra’s younger brother] stayed with me several times. King Mahendra and Crown Prince Birendra sent many V.I.P. royalty guests to me at Tigertops” (personal correspondence, 4/21/2008). I confirmed this last point with a palace official who worked as a close aide to Birendra in the late 1960s.

It so happened that we had a guest who was a member of the British royal family, Prince Richard of Gloucester. When Prince Richard came here, I called [Coapman] to the palace and told him, this is what we’d like done. I think that John Coapman, at least in the way he ran Tiger Tops at that time, certainly was extraordinary. Coapman was running the business and made a *brilliant* show of the elephants. He had the elephants do a wonderful performance and I know that Prince Richard was deeply impressed. [Coapman] did it so *brilliantly* that I went back to Crown Prince Birendra and reported well about him.

It’s hard to imagine a more glowing affirmation of Coapman if not from the royals themselves, at least from the palace. Regardless of problems he had as a manager, Coapman could put on a show his guests would never forget.

By the late 1960s Tiger Tops was beginning to garner favorable press coverage. A 1967 *Time* magazine article on Nepal tourism singled out Tiger Tops as “the most exciting of several new tourist hotels,” its exotic location “overlooking Nepal’s fabled tiger country” (*Time* 1967:27). In 1969 *New Yorker* “reporter at large” Jeremy Bernstein published several long articles on Nepal that included glowing descriptions of Coapman and Tiger Tops. Bernstein’s 1970 book also included a sizable section on Tiger Tops. Tiger

29. Not allowed to shoot anything, Dil Das recalled how occasionally a nice fat boar would chance to be run over while he and his coworkers were driving in a remote part of the preserve. “And what sister-fucking meat! I tell you, those Gurkhas are expert at this sort of thing. They got a cooking pot, filled it with meat, and fixed the boar right there. The next morning we left. We didn’t leave a single trace, not even any bones” (Alter 2000:77).

Tops even scored a three-page write up in *A Millionaire's Guide to Exotic Places* (Dormann 1973). In it Coapman is “a jungle genius,” the resort “a paradise in the middle of one of the world’s wildest jungles,” and the total experience one that “conspires to make you feel like a visiting rajah” (Dormann 1973:110–11).

Coapman’s Last Stand

Nevertheless, Tiger Tops struggled under Coapman’s management. According to Coapman, “the fatal problem I had at Tigertops and which was also endured by hotel pioneers at Katmandu . . . was the small numbers of tourists coming to Nepal in the 1960s” (personal correspondence, 7/15/2004). High-end Kathmandu hotels flourished in the late 1960s but, with most tourists on tightly scheduled package tours, there were few willing to spend the extra time and money to fly to the Tarai. By the time Nepal came into its own as a stand-alone destination, it was too late for John Coapman.

The seasonal nature of Nepal tourism was also a problem. The monsoon months (June–September) are cloudy, wet, and hot on the Tarai. Bringing guests on elephant back across the rain-swollen Rapti River from the airport was also a safety concern. The resort closed during the monsoon but Coapman still had to pay a large staff, feed elephants, and maintain a Kathmandu office.

Worse still, the Indo-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971 coincided with the peak tourist season and virtually dried up the flow of elite travelers. Debts mounted. “My rich Dallas partners stopped helping,” said Coapman, “and I kept Tigertops going for years with my own money and efforts. It was a big financial strain and loss.” Then on January 31, 1972, King Mahendra died while tiger hunting near Bharatpur, not far from Tiger Tops.³⁰ “Thus I lost my main supporter and friend,” said Coapman, and a month later, “I just gave up and left Nepal for Kenya” (personal correspondence, 7/15/2004).

Dil Das also linked Mahendra’s death to Coapman’s demise. Mahendra “was a friend of John sahib’s,” he said, but “there was some kind of conflict going on. . . . In the end he was forced out” (Alter 2000:75). The clash Dil Das sensed involved a number of other expats, Jim Edwards in particular. According to Coapman, “I had no problems with any Nepalese govern-

30. Coapman claims he was with the king when he died, a fact I have been unable to either confirm or deny.

ment or private Nepalese but many foreigners were jealous of my jungle control and success and tried to work against my interests” (personal correspondence, 7/15/2004). Once he’d departed, Coapman said, “My Dallas rich partners sold my 50 percent Tigertops shares to enemies of mine who told many lies to try to prevent me returning to Nepal or re-take my Tigertops” (ibid.).

The relationship between Edwards and Coapman had always been strained, with Coapman sabotaging Edwards’s hunts and Edwards making off-season raids on the Tiger Tops camp. But Edwards insisted that he was reluctant to take over Tiger Tops and did so only at the pleading of Coapman’s Texan partners. But Edwards’s close associates tell a different story—of Edwards aggressively courting the Texans and of questionable, even underhanded, tactics he used to take control. As one former colleague told me, “He went after it.”

Teasing out what happened requires some backtracking. In addition to his hunting business, Edwards was the Kathmandu sales agent for Pan American Airlines, having trained in New York before returning to Nepal and his partnership with McDougal in 1971. While in New York City, Edwards gave a talk at the Explorer’s Club on “Wildlife in Nepal.” Afterward, said Edwards,

two Texans came up to me: Toddie Wynne and Herb Klein. They said, “Oh we’ve heard of you through our manager there, John Coapman. Apparently you’ve been running down Tiger Tops.” So at the end of the evening the Texans said, “Look, we’ve got our spies. We may be rich and own oil wells but we’re not stupid. This guy [Coapman] has put in false claims for fire insurance; he’s embezzling money from us. Not big money . . . but it’s the principal of the thing.”

The Texans claimed to be Coapman’s “bosses,” not partners, and that Coapman “never owned a single share.” By the end of the meeting Edwards claimed that Wynne and Klein offered him twenty thousand dollars to return to Nepal to “do some research. It was purely out of ego. They felt that Coapman had kicked them in the face.”

Armed with letters from the Texans, Edwards returned to South Asia in the fall of 1971—with Tiger Tops reeling under mounting debt—and began looking for dirt. The firm’s Calcutta accountants found signs of embezzlement. In Kathmandu Elizabeth Hawley, recently fired by Coapman from her position as office manager, told of missing money but also “unpaid salaries, dead elephants, a staff on strike, no credit in Kathmandu, and so on” (McDonald 2005:102). Hawley also reported that the Nepal gov-

ernment was after Coapman for various unpaid fees and complaints from creditors. In the meantime Coapman fired Bob Murphy (a former Peace Corps volunteer who worked as Coapman's Chitwan manager), rehired him, and fired him again. In a daze, Murphy went looking for Edwards. "He told me that . . . Coapman had issued orders to all his staff to kill me on sight. Quite funny," said Edwards. Murphy also told Edwards that Coapman was planning to leave the country and that Edwards could take over Tiger Tops if he wanted.

Before leaving, Coapman played his last cards in the desperate hope of keeping Tiger Tops out of the hands of his "enemies." According to Edwards, Coapman "went to the government and said, 'You can have Tiger Tops for nothing. As rightful owner, I John Coapman give you this Tiger Tops.' I even have that letter somewhere." But others who were close to Edwards said that the threat of "nationalizing" Tiger Tops was a "ploy or ruse" Edwards used to try to scare the Texans into cutting a deal with him. Edwards sent cables to the US claiming that Tiger Tops was in imminent danger of being taken over by the government. Even Peter Byrne joined the effort to evict Coapman. In early 1972 Byrne sent frantic cables to Klein saying, "Do something quickly or the government will take it away. So they took it over."

Coapman fled and the Texans cut a deal with Jim Edwards and his partner, Chuck McDougal. They got 60 percent of the stock, and the Texans paid off half the creditors. Even then, Edwards claimed, he "still didn't want the thing" [Tiger Tops]. But in what appears to be more of a parting insult than a genuine proposal, Edwards offered to bring Coapman back on board as "operations director" with 10 percent of the business shares, allowing him to "run the show, but under our control and management." According to Edwards, Coapman responded with death threats.

With Coapman gone, Edwards and McDougal set about trying to pay off the resort's debts. Edwards estimated that they paid out about two hundred thousand dollars. "They used to come out of the woodwork—for years! 'Coapman owes us this for wood. Coapman owes us that for rice.' He even owed money to a guy in Kathmandu for an elephant he'd borrowed." Edwards got bar bills signed by Coapman to Tiger Tops "every time he went around India." But soon, with business booming at the lodge, Edwards didn't mind paying for Coapman's drinks.

I figured that's the least that we owed him. If he hadn't fucked up, if he hadn't made such a mess of things, I would never have been able to take over Tiger Tops, which was part of the jigsaw puzzle of my schoolboy dreams. So, thanks to Coapman. If

it wasn't for Coapman, we wouldn't be here today, and you wouldn't be sitting there.

Tiger Tops after Coapman

Edwards and McDougal quickly brought Tiger Tops back into the black. McDougal was an excellent naturalist and gave Tiger Tops strong wildlife tourism and conservation credibility (see McDougal 1977). Edwards was an enterprising businessman with skills as a manager. Aiming to expand the operation through more aggressive marketing, he rehired Elizabeth Hawley in Kathmandu and, in 1974, hired a young English traveler and self-described “failed hippie” as a public relations specialist. Lisa Choegyal ended up working with Edwards for twenty-five years during which time Tiger Tops prospered and grew enormously. A critical development was Tiger Tops’ merger with Mountain Travel, Nepal’s first trekking agency, founded by Jimmy Roberts in the 1960s (see chapter 3). Today the parent company, Tiger Mountain, operates a whole constellation of ecotourism enterprises across Nepal and South Asia.

Thanks to Edwards’s Pan Am connections, Edwards and Choegyal enjoyed free air travel to the US (and eventually elsewhere) where they lectured on wildlife in Nepal and talked up Tiger Tops to anyone who would listen. Choegyal had a knack for attracting “high-profile customers to the company” resulting in “a parade of stars”: Robert Redford, Henry Kissinger, Goldie Hawn, Jimmy Carter, and Hillary Clinton, to name only a few (McDonald 2005:103). Tiger Tops continued to draw high-profile media coverage including the May 1978 edition of *Town & Country*, the shi-shi American jet-setter magazine. On the cover a model poses with an elephant against a backdrop of Tarai grasses, part of a photo essay entitled “Fashion Trek to Far-Off Nepal.” Between high-end media coverage and celebrity visitors, before long, Choegyal explained, clients were asking for Tiger Tops by name, rather than depending on travel agents to sell “the product.”

But for all of Edwards’s and McDougal’s contributions, at its heart Tiger Tops remains the institution that John Coapman envisioned and brought to life. Not only did Coapman pioneer jungle tourism but, as Lisa Choegyal put it, his ideas have “trickled into the core of the Nepal tourism product.” Much of what Coapman established at Tiger Tops (from meal plans and accommodations, to resort layout and architecture) has become the unquestioned standard in dozens of other wildlife and ecotourism resorts around Nepal and all over the world.

Coapman after Tiger Tops

According to Coapman, during the 1960s senior members of the Hilton Hotel Corporation had invited him to develop game-viewing lodges in Africa similar to what he had created in Nepal. As the bottom fell out of Tiger Tops, in 1972 Coapman took up the offer and moved to Kenya. Coapman showed me photos of the two game lodges he constructed in Kenya's Tsavo National Park. The Taita Hills Lodge and the Salt Lick Lodge are both still in operation: Salt Lick Lodge especially resembles Tiger Tops complete with another Boris-inspired circular fireplace. A full-page magazine advertisement from the mid-1970s features head shots of Coapman (in bush shirt and cravat) and another manager. "Hilton International hotels in Kenya are different enough to surprise anybody. Tom Letham [Nairobi manager] would be surprised if a herd of elephants wandered through his lobby. John Coapman will be surprised if they don't." Coapman told me that he promised Hilton only to get the lodges up and running and operate them for a few years. Whether his departure from Kenya in 1977 was entirely of his own accord is hard to confirm but appears likely.

By the late 1970s Coapman had moved back to Mussoorie in the Himalayan foothills where he had spent much of his childhood and most of his summers as an adult. There he built Bhag Dera, or "Tiger Camp," in the wooded countryside away from town, beyond the Woodstock School campus, near the home of his old friend Dil Das. Joseph Alter, a family friend of Coapman's, describes Bhag Dera as the perfect fantasy of a colonial hunting lodge with trophies covering the walls and floors, a garden planted with English tea roses, bookcases full of colonial literature, tables and niches with Indian statuary and mementoes, a huge stone fireplace, rustic accouterments and furnishings, each item "carefully chosen and carefully displayed." Everything evoked the

nervous essence of imperial comfort, and the studied compulsiveness of colonial leisure. . . . The house itself was a fantasy which many might dream of but which only Coapman had the temerity to build. Down to its last detail everything was a product of his imagination. (Alter 2000:54)

In his early fifties, living by himself, hunting occasionally with Dil Das, and carrying on a strained relationship with the Woodstock School community, Coapman had come back to India to find himself. "He was trying to escape a legacy of fuzzy truths, and was searching, quite frankly, for some sort of meaningful life that was simple and down to earth" (Alter 2000:51).

Hilton International hotels in Kenya are different enough to surprise anybody.

Tom Letham would be surprised if a herd of elephants wandered through his lobby.



Tom Letham manages the Nairobi Hilton. Only an elephant would consider it off the beaten path. For people, it's right where you'll want to be—ideally located for launching a camera safari, or for business in East Africa.

But the only big game Tom sees is in the authentic African art that decorates the hotel. Or the photos you're going to bring back from your visit to the nearby wildlife preserves.

You may be surprised at the grace and leisure of the Nairobi Hilton.

It's a place where you nourish your body and spirit in superb restaurants that recall huge African lodges. Refresh yourself in the heated pool and sauna. Relax in its totally air-conditioned environment. And delight in shopping for handicrafts in the lobby arcade.

The Nairobi Hilton. It's full of surprises. But elephants aren't one of them.

John Coapman will be surprised if they don't.



John Coapman manages the Taita Hills and Salt Lick Game Lodges, 200 miles from Nairobi, 135 miles from Mombasa. Anyone but an elephant, or John Coapman, would consider it off the beaten path. John's experience in the area and his knowledge of wild animals and birds make him feel very much at home. Meanwhile, you'll feel at home on the all-weather highway that takes you there.

At Taita Hills, you'll find full Hilton hospitality in the middle of the bush. Where you can safari among the big game and awesome scenery of nearby Tsavo National Park.

Six miles away, across virgin bush and forest, stands Salt Lick Lodge. On stilts. So the lions, buffalo, antelope and elephants can amble through. And as they enjoy the salt lick below, you can enjoy a candlelit dinner and vintage wines above them. For all the comfort of your room, this is one Hilton where you can expect an unforgettable, sleepless night.

And more Hilton people are waiting when you add these exciting extensions to your East African safari.



Keadu Getaneh of the Addis Ababa Hilton: Mr. Getaneh is the Sales and Public Relations Manager of the Addis Ababa Hilton, Ethiopia's finest hotel. He knows just about everybody in this capital city and can help you get to know them. The hotel is 10 minutes from the airport, close to the main shopping centre and a short stroll from the Jubilee Palace.



Gervais Ramanitra of the Madagascar Hilton: As Personnel Manager, he makes sure the service is as fine as the food, which is considered to be the finest in Tananarive, capital of the Malagasy Republic. The hotel with its pool and 15th-floor Casino overlooks Lake Anosy, yet it's a 5-minute ride from the centre of the city.

**When's the last time you stayed with people who care?
For reservations call your travel agent or Hilton Reservation Service.**

 HILTON INTERNATIONAL

7 Hilton Hotels advertisement featuring John Coapman.

During these years Coapman dabbled with Indian religion, his quasi-Hinduism part of an effort to identify with his "native land." Yet, having chosen to live only a few kilometers from friends and family in the conservative, missionary-dominated Woodstock School community, Coapman's Hinduism was also a defiant snub to his own past. Coapman was drawn to the community even as he rejected their criticisms as nothing but the

ranting of “castrating, focus-frustrated missionary memsahibs” (personal correspondence, 4/21/2008).

Coapman’s cabin and its proximity to his old school and community seem to encapsulate the contradictions at the root of his very existence in South Asia. Between the rich fantasy of a colonial past and the unpleasant reality of postcolonial India, and between the longing to identify with either America or India and the ongoing experience of alienation from both, Coapman seems to have had no tenable resources out of which to be, or claim, an identity. In the end, by 1980 the work of self-maintenance became so exhausting that Coapman “left India altogether and escaped the horns of a colonial dilemma” (Alter 2000:66).

When I asked Coapman why he never returned to Nepal (or India), he explained, “I am a remnant of the ancient feudal order.” At Tiger Tops, “the king transferred his feudal authority to me, a well-known professional hunter,” and with that authority Coapman was able to command “the respect and fear [of] the local rural people and poachers. . . . Thus feudal control continued [as it had when the royal family controlled Chitwan] and I never lost an important wild animal in ten years.” But after Mahendra died and Coapman left in 1972, “60 to 80 percent of all rhinos, tigers, and most wildlife was killed/poached. Feudal control was gone.” In his last years Coapman watched the last vestiges of Nepal’s “feudal control” evaporate with the official demise of the monarchy in 2008. “I am glad that I am not now still in Nepal,” he said. “I would only live in *The Kingdom of Nepal*.”

PART TWO

Hippie Nepal

The Great Rucksack Revolution: Western Youth on the Road to Kathmandu

“Whoeeel!” yelled Dean. “Here we go!” And he hunched over the wheel and gunned her; he was back in his element, everybody could see that. We were all delighted, we all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, *move*. And we moved!
JACK KEROUAC, *ON THE ROAD* (1957)

The year 1965 was the first year that leisure travelers outnumbered business travelers (Rana 1971), as booming Western economies put new forms of consumption within reach of ever more middle-class people. Airlines initiated lower-priced “economy” seating on new, larger planes and added charter flights to encourage greater tourist traffic (Satyal 1999:5). Declining ticket prices and increased tourist volume sparked a worldwide tourism infrastructure construction boom—such as the new luxury hotels that opened in Kathmandu in 1965. The United Nations declared 1967 the “International Tourist Year.”

In the 1950s around 80 percent of tourists in Nepal were from the US—declining to about half by 1965 and a third by 1970 (Satyal 1999:8). During those years Nepal’s tourist arrivals rose dramatically with annual growth rates approaching 40 percent through most of the 1960s (Satyal 2000:6–7). But while tourist *numbers* were on the rise between 1960 and 1975, tourists’ average *age* dropped significantly. From being overwhelmingly late middle aged up to about 1965, by 1972

45 percent of Nepal's tourist arrivals were thirty or under, and 70 percent were under 45 (Satyal 2000:9, 21). Older tourists continued to come but their brief, tightly scheduled visits gave them little contact with local people. By contrast, younger travelers wanted not just lower prices but also a more intimate feel for Nepali life. By the early 1970s the average high-end traveler spent three nights in Nepal, whereas budget travelers averaged *over two weeks* (Burger 1978:119).

From a trickle of young shoestring travelers who managed to make it to Kathmandu in the 1950s, to a small stream of "beatnik" tourists in the early 1960s, it wasn't until about 1965 that the city emerged as a bona fide youth destination. By the late 1960s Kathmandu was one of the principle stops on the trans-Eurasian Hippie Trail that stretched from Europe and North Africa across Western and South Asia to South East Asia. Because Kathmandu was roughly halfway—and, at least for North Americans, as far away from home as one could get—the Hippie Trail was often simply called the "Road to Kathmandu," or even just the "RTK."

According to David Tomory "two great waves" of young travelers "rolled East" along the RTK. The pioneers staked out territories and lifestyles prior to 1967. Then, from around 1968 to 1972 a much bigger wave of disaffected Western youth surged down the road. "First you get the black sheep, and then you get the flock" (Tomory 1996:38). This chapter charts the experiences of those first black sheep and the Nepalis who had to deal with them.

"The Great Rucksack Revolution": Pioneers on the Road to Kathmandu

At least a few young budget tourists found their way to Kathmandu almost as soon as it opened to foreigners. The *real* shoestring travelers arrived overland usually having driven, or even hitchhiked, all the way from Europe. In 1956 Han Suyin noted that spring arrived in Kathmandu along with a small stream of hitchhikers and artists: "young men and women in love with sunburnt faces and no money" (1973 [1958]:204–5). The first person on record to drive the full distance from Europe to Kathmandu was Boris Lissanevitch, the eccentric hotel proprietor (see chapter 4). In 1957 he led a convoy of three specially outfitted Land Rovers from Solihull, England, to Kathmandu (Peissel 1966:237). After forty-two days Boris pulled into the Royal Hotel with his odometer reading 7,692 miles.¹

1. A few years later Boris repeated the trip but this time pulling camping trailers with the aim of establishing a luxury overland tour service. One trip was enough to dissuade Boris of his idea's feasibility (Peissel 1966:239–40).

Boris's travels generated a wave of media coverage (Peissel 1966:272) which in turn attracted more and more overlanders. Expat Hugh Wood mentions "two young Americans" driving a Citroen arriving in 1958 (1987:203). In 1959 beatnik muse Hope Savage, traveling alone, hitchhiked her way from Europe to Kathmandu (Baker 2008:17). In 1960 John Morris met a young English couple who "had become dissatisfied with life in England" and, "having long been attracted to Tibet," settled on Nepal as "the next best thing" (1963:54). In 1961 twenty-one-year-old Francis Hutchins flew into Kathmandu (on a round-the-world ticket) and spent a week exploring the valley on foot and rented bicycle. A self-described "proto-hippie," Hutchins stayed at a "small hotel on an even smaller street in the old city" (2007:25) but remembers meeting no other Westerners his age.²

When American Beat Generation poet and Buddhist practitioner Gary Snyder visited Kathmandu in 1962 he was already well-known within Western countercultural circles. Later a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and nature writer, Snyder was one of the first postwar Americans to delve deeply into Eastern spirituality. He studied Buddhism at the University of California and under Zen masters in Japan in the 1950s. Snyder was not only close to "Beat" icons Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac but was literally the inspiration for Kerouac's influential 1958 *The Dharma Bums*. This largely autobiographical novel recounts the time Kerouac and Snyder ("Japhy Rider") spent together in 1955 and 1956 and celebrates what was then a rare outdoorsy lifestyle combining "dharma" meditation with "rucksack"-backpack camping.

The original Dharma Bum's arrival in Kathmandu in 1962 is cause to reflect on the role Jack Kerouac played in launching a generation of travelers onto the RTK. Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* came on the heels of his massively popular and influential first novel *On the Road* (1957) which is heralded as "the novel of the Beat Generation equivalent in stature and significance to [Hemingway's] *The Sun Also Rises* for the Lost Generation" (Menand 2007:88). Exploding with breathless enthusiasm, *On the Road* exuberantly promotes a primal living-in-the-moment ethos of experiencing deeply for the sake of deep experience. Apart from a mildly anarchist disregard for propriety (and the law) the book is not particularly countercultural.³ But its celebration of the free, perpetual traveling life resonated with baby boomers then coming of age. Writing of hippie-era travelers on the RTK, Rory Maclean notes, "for many, Jack Kerouac kick-started their journey"

2. Hutchins went on to become a Harvard University professor and private tutor to (Crown Prince and later King) Birendra of Nepal during his time at Harvard in 1968 (Hutchins 2007).

3. Nevertheless, beatniks were enough to inspire FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover to identify them as "one of the three most dangerous threats facing the country" (Baker 2008:55).

(2006a). One traveler claims to have set out overland for Kathmandu (from Europe) with nothing but a handwritten list of cities, a map, “and the obligatory Kerouac.”⁴

On the Road and *The Dharma Bums* are less about rebellion than about alienation and longing for something imagined to have been lost—something that might still be found *out there*. Whether “on the road” or “on the Way” (dharma) these books are about the quest for meaning through experience (Menand 2007). Toward the end of *On the Road*, the novel’s Kerouac figure imagines a road trip “around the equatorial belly of the world” from Morocco to Arabia and finally to “Benares, the Capital of the World” (1957:264). Kerouac’s premonition of the Hippie Trail comes through even more clearly in *The Dharma Bums* where he envisions a world full of

dharma bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that cheap crap they didn’t really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars. . . . I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad. (1958:83)

Later Kerouac continues this prophetic vision of Western youth setting out for Asia to find themselves and save the world.

Think what a great world revolution will take place when East meets West finally, and it’ll be guys like us that can start the thing. Think of the millions of guys all over the world with rucksacks on their backs tramping around the back country and hitchhiking and bringing the word down to everybody. (1958:170)

These lines read like a game plan for what indeed turned out to be millions of young Westerners who, a decade later, were streaming toward the East, many of them clutching Hindu or Buddhist books in one hand, and Kerouac’s in the other.

In retrospect dharma bum Gary Snyder’s visit to Kathmandu in 1962 is more notable for its link to Kerouac and the Beat Generation than for anything that actually happened during his one-week stay. In fact, for Snyder Kathmandu was one of the less inspiring stops on his half-year tour of South Asian Buddhist historical sites. With his wife, Joanne Kyger, and fellow Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, Snyder traveled to India on a freighter

4. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/blog/2007/oct/03/beforelonelyplanet>.

along with other young “international tramp tourists” (1983:9). Around the subcontinent they met a surprising number of Westerners living and studying at various ashrams. Of these, “the Americans we saw in India all looked sleek, vaguely troubled, trying to be good guys, but uncomprehending (except the beatniks)” (1983:97).

After visiting several north Indian Buddhist pilgrimage sites, Snyder and Kyger headed to Nepal by air: “an easy, inexpensive plane flight from Patna” (1983:44). (Ginsberg stayed in India hanging out with young Bengali poets, hoping to find a guru, and frequenting opium establishments [Baker 2008].) In Kathmandu they checked into the Himalaya Hotel, which they were told was the cheapest in town, but “it was so filthy and rat-infested that the next day we moved to a hotel a cut better” (1983:43). They visited the standard tourist sites including Swayambhu and Bodhanath and one day rented a jeep with other tourists to drive up to the valley rim for better views of the Himalayas. By telling coincidence, one of the other passengers was an American who had attended one of Snyder’s poetry readings in San Francisco the previous year! Thus, already in 1962, the nucleus of a Western alternative youth scene was forming in Kathmandu. “More foreigners here than we had seen any place else,” Snyder noted (1983:44).

Also significant was Snyder’s encounter with Tibetan Buddhism. With formal training in Buddhist studies and Zen, one might expect him to have been intrigued by the Buddhism practiced by Kathmandu’s Tibetan refugees. Yet Snyder was anything but enthralled with Tibetan Buddhism (even though he later had an audience with the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala) (1983:83). For Snyder Tibetan Buddhism was a pitiable, rather vulgar practice, then on its last legs because of its own internal deficiencies. Tibetan Buddhism was “ripe for a number of reforms” and would need to be “purified to some extent” if it was to have any hope of surviving (1983:74).

Unlike the adoring Tibetophiles who would soon descend on Kathmandu eager to embrace Tibetan Buddhism precisely *because* of its Tibetan aura, Snyder held the Western scholarly view that Tibetan practice was contaminated with non-Buddhist (namely, Tantric) accretions, hence Snyder’s call for its “purification.” For Buddhologists the ancient “true path” was better preserved in the Theravada (and some Mahayana—like Zen) traditions (Lopez 1998:32, 168). Visiting Kathmandu in 1966, Colin Simpson was even more critical. To him Tibetan “Lamaism” was a “distorted” and “degenerate form” full of “esoteric rigmarole” and obsessed with “instant-holiness gadgetry” like prayer wheels (1976 [1967]:32, 40).

Yet by the mid-1960s Kathmandu was already a magnet for Westerners in search of “authentic” Tibetan culture and Tibetan Buddhist teachers.

Notably, *their* route to Buddhism was *not* through academia but through the exoticizing, anti-intellectual traditions of Theosophy and its offshoots. Dubiously credentialed “masters” such as German “Lama Govinda” and his 1966 *Way of the White Clouds* drew a new generation of seekers to Tibetan Buddhism, and to Kathmandu. But “beats” like Snyder and Ginsberg also helped lure people to South Asia. Accounts of their 1962 sojourn soon appeared in places like Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s trend-setting *City Lights Review*, inspiring others to set out on the Road to Kathmandu (Tomory 1996:87).

Christmas in Kathmandu

In the mid-1960s a call went out on the emerging Western youth dharma-bum, beatnik traveler circuit announcing a countercultural youth gathering in Kathmandu at Christmastime. Some date the first holiday confab to 1963 (Beisler 2006:223), others to 1965 (Adams 2001), but the actual date was Christmas 1966 (Chawla 1967). The relatively large community of young foreigners Snyder had noted in 1962 was growing quickly. One Peace Corps volunteer (PCV) described a “pretty sudden” increase in scruffy young tourists in late 1964 when he returned to Kathmandu from his rural assignment. Another American PCV stationed at the sleepy border town of Birgunj in 1965 observed firsthand the small but steady stream of young budget travelers arriving from India. He estimated that foreigners were arriving at a rate of “dozens per month,” most by public transportation (trains, buses, trucks) though some driving their own vehicles.

One of these was Irish adventurer Dervla Murphy who in April 1965 took a train to the Nepal border. Teaming up with three other travelers (Irish, Swiss, and American) for eight rupees (half the price of the bus) she hitched a ride on a truck to Kathmandu. After an exhausting trip the truck deposited them at the Bhimsen Tower bus park, just outside the old city, into an already established tourist scrum “of much haggling, arguing, and general commotion” (1967:10–17). After one night in a “dingy but—by Asian standards—wildly expensive hotel,” Murphy moved to “the labyrinthine Youth Hostel in Jawalkhel” despite its out-of-the-way location (1967:17–20).

By the mid-1960s Kathmandu’s youth tourism scene was sizable enough that more well-heeled visitors began anxiously taking note. In a book recounting his 1966 visit, Briton Colin Simpson often seems as interested in scandalous beatnik tourists as in Nepal itself. As such, Simpson is an early example of how Western anxieties followed radicalized youth

wherever they went. Even as they fled their homelands, Western media tracked their movements making their presence in any non-Western place a newsworthy matter. With fretful fascination Simpson left his four-star hotel, venturing into the old city where he encountered two young, bearded Germans—one sporting an exotic Afghan goatskin jacket. To Simpson’s relief,

both were intelligent, articulate in English, concerned to know the world and its people and, especially its cultures. They had come out of Europe through Turkey, and from Iran they had gone into Afghanistan. . . . They were traveling as cheaply as they could. (1976 [1967]:89–90)

As for marijuana, Simpson was further comforted to learn that smoking left people “weak and meek” with “a feeling of peaceful fraternity” (1976 [1967]:90). In the end Simpson can assure his readers that, in fact,

most of the so-called Beatniks in Katmandu were not Beatniks at all. They were simply adventurous young men (hardly any were girls) with a disposition to travel and with more hair on their faces than money in their pockets. (1976 [1967]:84)

If for Simpson the “beard-and-sandals brigade” were not beatniks, then who were? Beyond their slovenliness, Simpson was concerned about these young people’s sexuality. “Were these womenless men, who could hardly afford to buy sex, also attracted to each other?” Simpson asks anxiously. Again his interviewees assured him that there were very few homosexuals among them. “Yet the Beatnik Poet Laureate, [Allen] Ginsberg, paraded his ‘queerness,’” Simpson concludes—in a seeming non sequitur that must have passed as solid evidence of universal beatnik queerness.

The first sizable “Christmas in Kathmandu” gathering of Western youth happened in December 1966, only a few weeks after Simpson’s departure. There may have been a holiday party in 1965, as Adams (2001) insists, but if so it was a warm-up for the 1966 edition. Word circulated months in advance that Kathmandu was the place to be at Christmas. One woman I interviewed was in Tehran in early December 1966 when she first heard the news. Ironically it came not from fellow travelers but in a *Sunday Times* (London) clipping sent by her mother! A November 12, 1966, article reports an impending “international convention” of “beatniks of the world” in Kathmandu:

The bush telegraph has sounded from Saigon to Skibbereen and the bearded ones are on their barefoot way. In fact, a lot of them are here already, tasting the squalid,

hemp-enlightened joys of the “Tibetan Cat Café” and the “Globe Restaurant,” for Kathmandu has become in recent years one of the most popular goals of beatnik travel—a final symbol of withdrawal from the world. (Holden 1966)

Years later she reflected, “You know, the hippie phenomenon was being written about in the West before the people who were traveling, before we *even knew* we were a phenomenon!”

By early December Nepal’s government-run English-language newspaper *The Rising Nepal* announced on its front page that “Beatniks throughout the world have decided to spend their Christmas in Kathmandu.” This was not welcome news. “The intelligentsia here are of the opinion that His Majesty’s Government must have proper measure to see to it that our young people are not polluted by . . . the degenerated dignitaries whom they address themselves as Beatniks.” A week later the paper published a more positive view of beatniks as humanists, “literary giants,” and earnest critics of technological society (in Simpson 1976 [1967]:83–84).

Exactly what happened around Christmas of 1966 is hard to say. In Kathmandu most people hardly noticed. The real action—such as it was—centered on Dhulikhel, a village on the valley’s northeastern rim popular for viewing the full Himalayan panorama. According to hippie lore, “when the first group of hippies arrived in Kathmandu, they were led by an American named Lee, and they established a camp at Dhulikhel” (Tomory 1996:185, cf. Beisler 2006:223). *Life* magazine (1967) reported that two hundred “sandaled hippies⁵. . . turned up in Kathmandu last Christmas” and the London *Sunday Telegraph* reported the event on May 21, 1967, in an article entitled “Beats of All Lands Unite, in Kathmandu.”

These two hundred people formed the nucleus of a community that, by early 1967, was known as “Hippieland” (Bernstein 1970:70). One woman I interviewed arrived in Kathmandu in the spring of 1967 and heard about a “hippie commune” outside of town:

It was called “Hippieland, Dhulikhel.” And when you went there they’d stamp your passport: “Hippieland Dhulikhel, LSD, Nepal.” I decided to just get it on a piece of paper, not in my passport.

Bernstein reports that the Dhulikhel group styled itself as an “LSD United Nations” (1970:71). An American development worker stationed in Kathmandu at the time recalled that by spring 1967,

5. Dated August 11, 1967, this is the first use of “hippie” I have found in print.

there were some thousands of them up there and it was really a bad scene. I mean no sanitary facilities, and the otherwise very gentle Newars of Dhulikhel began to get really upset. And there were some fights that broke out. At one point apparently the local people decided to kick these people out and the police were called in. So the police had to disperse them and send them back to Kathmandu. After that they had a compromise: they'd allow only a hundred at a time up there at Dhulikhel.

The woman who collected a Hippieland stamp remembered how visitors started building their own shelters from bricks “borrowed” from the locals. There are also stories of Nepalis scandalized by hippie nudity (Bernstein 2004). By late 1967 Dhulikhel’s Hippieland was history though the Christmas-in-Kathmandu tradition continued for a few more years. Resident expats remember hippie numbers swelling annually around Christmas. But before long young travelers realized that, despite its charms, Christmastime (cold and sometimes rainy) wasn’t the best time to be in Kathmandu. By 1970 most people joined the winter migration to the beaches of Goa (on India’s west coast) where another “big beatnik scene” was underway (Tomory 1996:112).

Even with Hippieland’s demise, by late 1967 there was a sizable foreign youth presence in Kathmandu:

There were never less than a hundred or a hundred and fifty foreign travelers in town, resident or passing through. Many spoke several languages, lived with the locals, knew their customs and religions. Eccentric, individualistic: a truly amazing lot. (Tomory 1996:185)

It was “a very cool scene . . . overlanders, a few old beatniks our parents’ age, and the most interesting cross-section of people in the world” (Tomory 1996:185). One woman who spent several months in Kathmandu in 1967 reminisced of “a kind of magical moment.”

We lived like them [Nepalis]. We went out and washed at the pump next to them. We ate their food, and we just enjoyed the experience of being there and living like them. There wasn’t any arrogance.

“One was like a blotting paper,” she continued:

You let it all wash over you. It was almost a brief window of innocence. It was safe to do that then. . . . For us, at that age, the whole world seemed at peace. Of course it wasn’t. But we were *absolutely* innocent and peace loving.

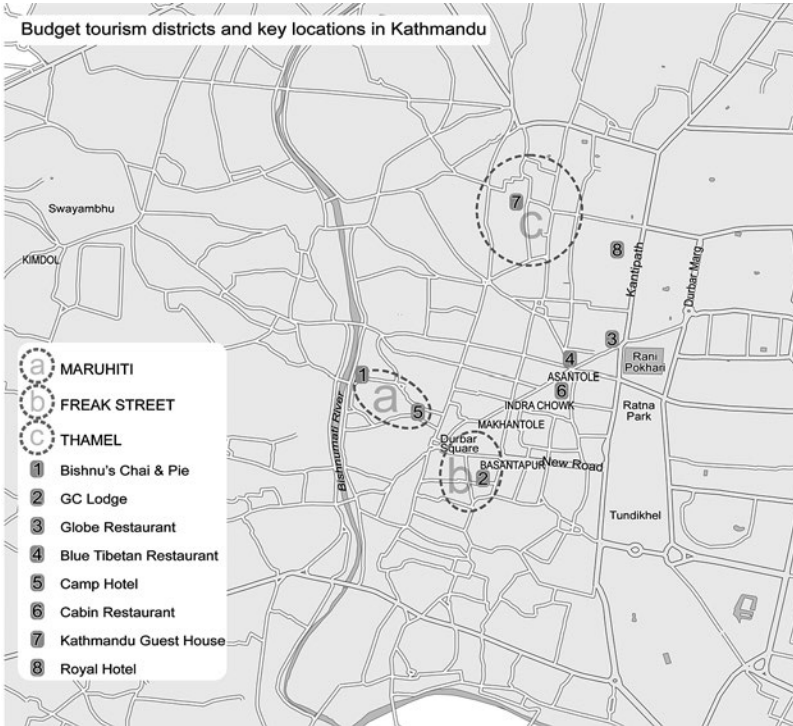
“It was one of the best times to be young,” recalled one person I interviewed. “Not like today. I pity young people today. . . . In those days we thought the world was just getting better and better.” Even allowing for a liberal dose of nostalgia, it’s hard not to sense something special about this convergence of people, time, and place as idealistic Western youth encountered tolerant Nepalis in a city that foreigners were primed and determined to experience as exotically enchanting.

The First Budget Lodges and Restaurants

By the mid-1960s there were about a dozen registered hotels in Kathmandu ranging from the brand new five-star Soaltee, to the Royal Hotel of fading glory, to the “rat-infested” Himalaya Hotel. But even the cheapest hotels were overpriced for budget travelers. For them the old city beckoned, setting in motion a process whereby foreigners looking for “authentic” (and cheap) local experience found locals who were, if not equally inquisitive, at least interested in what little money these foreigners had to spend. At one extreme were the hard-core travelers who slept for free on temple platforms or open-sided shelters around the old city and designed as accommodations for Nepali travelers (Simpson 1976 [1967]:90). But most budget travelers were looking for at least a minimum of comfort and security. These people managed to cross the language barrier to find lodging in Nepali homes.

Almost certainly it was from experiences with foreign lodgers—and their friends, and *their* friends—that Nepalis got the idea of establishing tourist lodge businesses. One woman who arrived overland in 1966 described how, by “word of mouth,” she learned of a family renting rooms in the heart of the old city. Intriguingly, during the month she stayed there, the family officially transformed their home into a guest house, hanging a signboard outside their door. Likely this pattern was typical once locals realized they could make a bit of money from travelers. Travelers had probably been boarding with Nepali families for a year or two but 1966 saw a critical mass of budget tourist arrivals spurring entrepreneurs to target them for the first time.

One of the first budget lodges in Kathmandu was the GC Lodge located off a tiny backstreet southeast of Durbar Square, near what later became known as Freak Street. Its owner, Gyan Man Bania, operated an ayurvedic medicine shop which had been in his family since the Malla era (and remains to this day) in a prime location opposite the Kastabmandap Temple in Durbar Square. It was Gyan Man’s eldest son, Chaitya Krishna Bania, who proposed turning part of their family’s fifty-room home into the GC



MAP Budget tourist districts and key locations in Kathmandu.

Lodge (“G” for his father Gyan and “C” for his mother Chini Kumari). Younger relatives don’t recall exactly when the lodge opened but guess that it was probably in 1966 or 1967.

For foreigners seeking an authentic experience, the GC Lodge was a good bet. Just getting there was an adventure. Like many Newar homes the GC Lodge was located in an interior courtyard accessible from the street only through a cramped, tunnel-like passageway which, at around 1.2 meters tall by four meters long, was awkward even for Nepalis. Gyan Man’s youngest son remembers growing up with large foreigners trying to navigate this passage with backpacks. “They’d be bent over double trying to get through and by the time they did they’d hit their heads and were cursing as they walked in!” Initially the GC Lodge charged ten Nepali rupees (around one US dollar) per person per night. Soon the family hired a cook and turned the ground floor into a restaurant. Both businesses thrived for about a decade before business tapered off through the 1980s with the family finally shutting its doors around 1995.

Although not, strictly speaking, a “budget” establishment, the Panorama Hotel was another early lodge that aimed at a slightly down-market foreign clientele. Located in Khichapokhari near where trucks and buses deposited overland arrivals, the Panorama was opened around 1963 by Tej Ratna Tuladhar. It soon became popular with academics, older world travelers, business people, and, by the late 1960s, overland bus tour clientele—many of them loyal repeat visitors who were fond of “Dad” Tuladhar. In its heyday the Panorama boasted a pub complete with British barkeeper and a booking agent in Paris.⁶

There were, of course, other hotels in Kathmandu though none of them catered to the beatnik/hippie crowd. Even if they could afford to stay at places like the Annapurna or the Royal Hotel, beatniks were given “short shrift” by the smartly dressed doormen and chased off the premises. Occasionally some of the “beard and sandal” crowd might sneak onto the grounds of the Royal Hotel in pursuit of wild marijuana that grew luxuriantly in the fields roundabout (Alderson 1971:168), or for a nap in the grass under the fruit trees where they “might get an hour or two undisturbed before Ma Scott . . . set the ponies loose” (Marnham 1971:234). At the other end of the market were hotels catering mainly to Indian businessmen and pilgrims. Young foreigners rarely stayed in these hotels, less due to low standards than a self-imposed segregation that created a revolving community of travel advice and companionship. In the days before guide books, other travelers were an indispensable source of information and key to surviving on a budget.

Restaurants were another prime location for socializing with other travelers. Because of Nepali concerns over ritual impurity (imparted by unknown cooks and foods), Kathmandu had essentially no restaurants until the 1950s and the arrival of new transient populations (Liechty 2005). Early hotels catering to Western tourists had their own restaurants but the first street-level restaurants were in Kathmandu’s New Road business district and catered to Indian business travelers. In 1957 the Snow View Hotel converted its dining room into a public restaurant specializing in Chinese food. In 1960 curmudgeonly British pensioner John Morris frequented the Aroma Restaurant on New Road which, he reports, advertised in the English-language paper *The Rising Nepal* as “the only de-luxe restaurant in Nepal” (1963:193). The Aroma, too, seems to have been an Indian es-

6. Tej Ratna Tuladhar grew up in Tibet, the son of a Newar merchant family that for generations had transported goods between Calcutta and Lhasa via Kathmandu (cf. Tuladhar 2004). But after China invaded Tibet in the 1950s Kathmandu Newar merchants were forced to sell off Tibetan assets and seek new business opportunities. Tej Ratna invested in the newly emerging global tourist trade as did several other former Lhasa Newar merchant families.

establishment with (what Morris describes as) garish Indian-inspired decorations, Indian food (which was good “so long as one took care not to notice the cook, squatting in the midst of a pile of fly-covered refuse”), and Indian patrons including servants employed by American aid workers (1963:194). As for other Westerners, in the months that Morris spent patronizing The Aroma Restaurant, he saw only one (“an American woman in tight-fitting trousers”). “Nearly all Americans,” Morris continued, “seem to have a pathological fear of germs” and therefore avoided local restaurants (1963:194). With both Nepalis and American expats terrified by the thought of impurities, restaurants were a tough sell in Kathmandu.

By January 1968 when the Nepal government printed what was, I believe, the first tourist map of Kathmandu, none of these New Road restaurants survived. Yet the map lists close to twenty new restaurants. Some were associated with hotels and lodges, others catered to Indian visitors, but there were also new restaurants whose names were already appearing in budget traveler diaries. For visitors looking to live on the cheap, even Kathmandu’s Indian restaurants were too expensive. But wandering the streets, they found Nepali vendors selling Nepali tea and snacks. One visitor in the mid-1960s remembered:

You could get wonderful chai. And tea houses would make you some rice and vegetables if you asked them. You know, they gradually changed their menu for you on demand. . . . And if they’re enterprising, they’d open up their ground floor. Put out some tables and chairs and you’ve got a restaurant.

Similarly, a Nepali who grew up in the old city recalled, “The hippies didn’t want to eat in the hotels; they wanted to try new things. So they started hanging around in the sweets shops. It all happened at the same time as the budget lodges [were opening].” Communicating through gestures, smiles, and the language of money, hungry hippies found willing Nepali cooks.

Several of the earliest restaurants mentioned by budget travelers were run by Tibetans. By the mid-1960s Kathmandu had a sizable Tibetan refugee population with more fleeing the brutal Chinese occupation every year. Destitute, they quickly flooded the local labor market seeking out niches where they might make a living. Restaurants were one such niche.

The first of these (that survives in memory) was the Globe Restaurant—located in Bhotahiti, not far from Asantole, the old city’s central market—where they served low-wage Tibetan porters and mule drivers. The restaurant consisted of seven tables, some sturdy chairs, and photos of the Dalai Lama (Colaabavala 1974:9). When the Globe opened isn’t clear but by 1965 its clientele of Nepali Sherpas and Tibetan porters had already made it

the go-to location for foreigners organizing treks on the cheap (Murphy 1967:162). For a few rupees you could get a plate of rice and dal, or buffalo meat-filled Tibetan dumplings known as *momos*, or even buffalo steak. In August 1967 an American couple wrote in their travel diary of eating at a “little Tibetan restaurant” called the Globe where they “got a nice bowl of garlicky noodle veg. soup very cheaply” (Jacobson and Jacobson 1967:5). They also enjoyed chatting with the proprietor’s two daughters who were enrolled in the local Catholic girl’s school and spoke “excellent English” (1967:11). With good, cheap food and English-speaking hosts, the Globe quickly became a place to swap stories and advice for life on the road with other beatnik/hippie travelers (Simpson 1976 [1967]:90).

By 1966 the Globe’s owners had also converted rooms above the restaurant into a boarding house (Simpson 1976 [1967]:93). A tiny room with rope-strung cot and glassless shuttered windows cost three rupees. A room was \$4.50 per month if you paid in US currency, or the equivalent of \$8.00 in Nepali rupees (Stablein 1985:61). To really save money you could sleep on the floor in a dormitory room for 1.50 rupees per night, or even on the restaurant floor for half a rupee (Colaabavala 1974:9). Over time the Globe shifted its operations to cater specifically to the growing numbers of Western youth tourists.

With so many foreign patrons, before long the Globe was (in)famous for marijuana. Almost everyone described the “haze of smoke” and “the sweet smell of charas fumes” (Simpson 1976 [1967]:93; Colaabavala 1974:9). A Nepali man who grew up nearby remembered a boyhood visit to the Globe with an American who treated him to a hot lemon drink. While there, he saw foreigners emptying cigarettes to replace tobacco with hashish. Marilyn Stablein describes the place as full of smoke, except when Tibetan monks were present. Because cigarette smoke killed *gandharava* celestial beings, smokers risked being rebuked as “God slayers” (Stablein 1985:65). Ultimately its Western clientele ended up slaying the Globe itself in September 1967. “A large number of the sahibs staying in my hotel for weeks promised to pay in full at the time of their departure, but left the hotel for a walk in the city and never returned,” the Globe’s owner complained to a foreign journalist. “They are great liars and they ruined my business” (Morsch 1967).

Into the Tibetan Blue

It’s not clear when hippies discovered the “Tibetan Blue” restaurant on a side street not far from the Asantole market but it’s almost certain that

they gave the restaurant its name. Another business initially aimed at Tibetan porters and muleteers, the restaurant had blue walls and the name Tibetan Blue began circulating among foreigners looking for a cheap place to eat. To avoid the Globe restaurant's fate, the Tibetan Blue's owner posted a sign on the wall: "Attention, Westerners please must pay in advance for every eatable purchased here" (Morsch 1967).

Already in 1967 the restaurant was featured in the *Berkeley Barb*, an influential underground countercultural newspaper. In his article "Haight Street Marco Tells of Hippy Haven" Ernie Barry describes Kathmandu as

nirvana for me. It's the most peaceful place I've visited in my life. And it costs \$1 a day to live in Nepal. Including good amounts of hash. It's so peaceful. I saw two policemen walking down the street holding hands in friendship.

For Barry the Tibetan Blue was "the center of things for Europeans and Americans. It is usually full of hip people smoking hash and Nepalese sitting around staring at the consumer goods ads in the hippies' Western magazines" (Barry 1967:11).

One person I interviewed remembered Tibetan Blue as

just a hole in the wall. The enterprising chef knew that momos and not-too-spicy noodles were the order of the day—buff[alo] momos and buff noodles. As people came he put down more benches and tables. It was where you could go and talk to other travelers and that's what made it attractive as much as anything else.

For about thirty cents you could get a buff steak, soup, tea, and a stack of chewy Tibetan bread (Colaabavala 1974:8–9). By 1969 Tibetan Blue was even advertising in Kathmandu's English-language newspaper, touting its "cheap and delicious Tibetan, Chinese, and European dishes. Best tea, and coffee too available."⁷ In 2008 a Nepali businessman recalled growing up near Tibetan Blue:

It was opened by a *bhote*⁸ named Tobgyal. You know, that Tobgyal introduced us to a lot of new kinds of food. I saw *thukpa* [noodle soup] for the first time in his restaurant, and even chowmein. For many days my friends and I didn't dare eat chowmein because it looked just like boiled worms! It really looked disgusting but when we tried it, it was great.

7. *The Rising Nepal*, April 1, 1969, p. 6.

8. *Bhote* is a Nepali term for people of Tibetan ethnic origin (whether from Tibet or Nepal) with often derogatory connotations.

Adding to Tibetan Blue's appeal was its location across the street from a government-licensed hashish shop: an Asian-style pipe (chillum) seems to have circulated among patrons almost perpetually. A British television news segment on "simple minded hippies" in Kathmandu (ca. 1967) features footage of chillum-sucking hippies at Tibetan Blue where "only rasping coughs break the peaceful silence."⁹ Western music also broke the silence. One person remembered, "The first cassette tape recorder I ever saw in Asia was in there" (Tomory 1996:186).

As one of the most famous spots on the early Hippie Trail, Tibetan Blue's "celebrated" status lured *New Yorker* correspondent Jeremy Bernstein through its doors in 1967, intent on documenting the condition of the West's wayward youth:

I was greeted at the door by a bearded American from Long Beach California, who was wearing a yellow robe. At first I thought he must be the owner, but he cordially introduced me to two rather bemused-looking Tibetans for whom he seemed to be working as a kind of greeter. He offered me a turn at a pipe being passed around among the clientele. When I turned it down he said, "Man, if your cup is filled, there is nothing I can do for you," and disappeared into the kitchen. (1970:71)

In fact the restaurant's greeter was Bhagavan Das (a.k.a. Kermit Michael Riggs), a strikingly tall, blond American seeker who had already spent years in South Asia, initially as a follower of the Neem Karoli Baba (a.k.a. Maharaj-ji), an influential Hindu guru.

Bhagavan Das's renown grew the following year when, also at Tibetan Blue, he met Richard Alpert, probably the most prominent countercultural traveler to visit Kathmandu since Gary Snyder. Alpert's fame derives from his relationship with psychedelic drug champion Timothy Leary, one of the leading figures of the hippie era. In the early 1960s Alpert and Leary were professors at Harvard University where together they launched the "Harvard Psychedelic Research Project" (Leary 1990 [1983]:35). These pioneering studies evaluated LSD, psilocybin, and other hallucinogenic compounds for their potential to treat alcoholism and criminal recidivism (Hollingshead 1973:16). Leary and Alpert frequently used themselves as research subjects, meticulously documenting their experiences with various drugs.

Most relevant to this story is how Leary and Alpert's research orientation shifted from a materialist, scientific frame to an increasingly meta-

9. To see this clip go to <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=544606018890524&set=0.154982454540999&type=2&theater> (accessed 1/25/13).

physical or religious paradigm. Of his first LSD experience Leary wrote, “Since that time I have been acutely aware that everything I perceive, everything within and around me, is a creation of my own consciousness” (Leary 1990:119). For Alpert psychedelics led to the discovery that his psyche “existed independent of social and physical identity. That which was I was beyond Life and Death. . . . That ‘I’ Knew—it really Knew” (1971:6). Rather than viewing drug-induced states as neuro-chemical hallucinations, Leary and Alpert concluded that material reality itself was a brain-induced illusion. This position is not unlike Hindu/Buddhist Madhyamaka metaphysics (for which the material world is an illusion), and the Harvard group soon made the connection.¹⁰

As Leary and Alpert became ever more personally invested in mind-altering drugs they lost their jobs at Harvard (in 1963) but pushed deeper into Oriental mysticism. They soon discovered Evan-Wentz’s translation of the *Bardo Thodol* or *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a work that had inspired Carl Jung and generations of Theosophists (see chapter 1). Like Jung they read the *Bardo Thodol* as a “psychological” work, but further concluded that the text’s account of the soul’s journey to reincarnation was analogous to the steps toward enlightened consciousness they had experienced through psychedelic drugs (Alpert 1971:13–14). In 1964 Leary and Alpert (and former Harvard colleague Ralph Metzner) published *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Alpert describes the book as a paraphrase of the Tibetan work and “a manual for psychological death and rebirth” through LSD (Alpert 1971:13). *The Psychedelic Experience* became an instant countercultural classic, making its way into backpacks headed down the RTK, a road that Alpert himself soon followed.

By 1967 Alpert was unemployed (though making good money on the lecture circuit) when, invited to join a group traveling overland to South Asia from Europe, he jumped at the chance to advance his spiritual quest. “This was my way out. What else was I going to do at this point?” (1971:14). But after months of travel, enlightenment remained elusive.

We had done it all. We had gone to see the Dalai Lama . . . we had visited Benares, and finally we ended up in Katmandu. I started to get extremely, extremely depressed. . . . I had done everything I thought I could do, and nothing new had happened. . . . So I finally figured, “Well, it’s not going to happen.” We were about to go on to Japan and I was pretty depressed because we were starting the return now, and what was

10. Leary and Alpert weren’t the first to link drug-induced states with “oriental transcendentalism.” In his 1954 book *The Doors of Perception* Aldous Huxley argued that hallucinogens could lead to spiritual insight, a position that earned him the title the “patron saint of LSD.” Not coincidentally, Huxley was an advisor to the Harvard project (Leary 1990:36).

I returning to? What should I do now? . . . The despair was extremely intense at that point. (1971:15)

Though hardly a budget traveler (he stayed at Kathmandu's five-star Soaltee Hotel) nor, at age thirty-seven, exactly a "youth," Alpert identified with the hippie counterculture and soon found his way to a restaurant he calls the "Blue Tibetan":

I was in the Blue Tibetan . . . and in walked this very extraordinary guy. . . . He was 6'7"¹¹ and he had long blonde hair and a long blonde beard. He was a Westerner, an American, and was wearing holy clothes . . . and when he entered, he came directly over to our table and sat down. (1971:17)

The man was Bhagavan Das and Alpert immediately "had the feeling I had met somebody who 'Knew.'" Alpert managed to get the dreadlocked, saffron-robed, barefoot Bhagavan Das past the guards at the posh Soaltee Hotel where they "sat . . . for five days high on Peach Melbas and Hashish and Mescaline." There they

had a seminar with Alexandra David Neel's books and Sir John Woodroffe's *Serpent Power*, and so on. At the end of five days, I was still absolutely staggered by this guy. . . . I had the choice of going on to Japan on my first class route, or going off with this guy, back into India on a temple pilgrimage. (1971:17)

Throwing caution and comfort to the wind, Alpert followed Bhagavan Das to India. Through months of physical hardship and spiritual growth Bhagavan Das repeatedly dismissed Alpert's anxieties over the past and future with the gentle admonition "Just be here now." Alpert eventually embraced Hinduism, took the name Baba Ram Dass, and penned the vastly popular 1971 hippie classic *Remember, Be Here Now*. Selling over a million copies, the book launched Alpert's new career as a spiritual teacher (and author of ten more books), and launched countless other travelers seeking enlightenment on the Road to Kathmandu.

Pig/Pie Alley

By the late 1970s Kathmandu had a reputation on the budget traveler circuit as a great place to eat. Unlike most stops on the Hippie Trail where it

11. Others who knew Bhagavan Das describe him as being six feet tall (Stablein 2003:159).

was local food or nothing, Kathmandu became the “Alice’s Restaurant of the East,” a place where you could get just about anything you wanted. Whether your comfort food was steak and mashed potatoes, pancakes and jam, schnitzel and spaetzle, miso and soba, cheese and crusty bread, apple pie and chocolate cake, or brown rice with tofu and vegetables, you could get all of it, and more, locally made and at very low prices (Raj 2007:43). By the early 1970s Peace Corps volunteers from around Asia came to Kathmandu for R&R and to put flesh back on their bones. Many a traveler lingered in Kathmandu for weeks or months because of the food. Even if the dishes were sometimes only vague approximations of what travelers were used to, for most—starved for a taste of home—it was the thought that counted.

While other places tolerated budget travelers if they accommodated themselves to local conditions and tastes, in Nepal entrepreneurs learned early on that giving foreigners what they wanted was good for business. Budget travelers would happily eat the national cuisine of rice, dal, and vegetables, but offer them food from their homelands and they’d line up outside your door. As one visitor wrote in the Camp Hotel’s register in 1967, Kathmandu was “the place where my western stomach happily met western food.”

Kathmandu’s reputation for budget culinary diversity begins with Bishnu Dhoj Shahi, though few are aware of his contributions. Bishnu Shahi was born in 1929 into the untouchable Newar butcher caste. Historically Kathmandu’s caste communities were configured in something approximating concentric circles, with high-caste groups clustered around the central royal palace, merchant and occupational castes beyond them, then farmers, and finally, beyond the (now-gone) city walls, untouchable groups: sweepers, animal skimmers, and butchers. Bishnu Shahi grew up in a crude hut on unclaimed land at the bottom of a slope west of the old city, near the Bishnumati River. The area was used as a cremation grounds (rendering it haunted) and—in an era before indoor toilets, plumbing, or sewage systems of any kind—for defecation (rendering it impure, not to mention unsanitary). The low-caste people who lived there also kept hogs, which scavenged for feces and garbage and wallowed along the muddy riverbank. According to high-caste sensibilities, both the area and its people were disgusting and dirty.

Growing up at a time when even wealthier Nepalis had trouble accessing formal education, Shahi managed to acquire basic literacy and even learn some English. “I studied English during the Rana times, hiding books under my clothes,” he said. “If police would see things written in English, they would tear them away. Secretly I had to study.” With his bit of



8 Bishnu Dhoj Shahi and grandchild, March 2008. Photo by Mark Liechty.

English, Shahi became one of the very first Nepalis to work with Westerners and, in fact, worked as a cook for Paul Rose, the very first director of the American aid mission to Nepal. Eventually working with several American families, Shahi became an excellent cook and baker, and competent in spoken English. Around 1960 Shahi decided he could do better than the two hundred rupees/month (twenty dollars) Americans paid and started his own business—a tea shop in his family’s home in the untouchable community near the river.

By accident or design, this turned out to be an excellent location for a

tea shop. Shahi's butcher-caste community was along the old road linking Durbar Square with Swayambhu, the ancient Buddhist/Hindu temple and popular sightseeing destination perched dramatically on a hill west of the old city. Close to the footbridge that funneled pedestrians traveling to or from Swayambhu, Shahi's shop was perfectly located to attract thirsty customers. Although few Nepalis would drink his tea, foreigners did, not least because Shahi was one of few locals they could chat with in English. Little more than a few rickety tables and stools along the muddy/dusty road out of town, the shop became a popular place for young tourists to hang out (Raj 2007:44).

The area was soon known to foreigners as "Pig Alley," hardly an auspicious address for a tea shop. Nepalis from the area remember how

left and right there were pigs! Tourists used to be surprised. Where they come from they only see pigs in sheds but here they found pigs wandering around the streets. They're the ones who gave this name "**Pig Alley**."¹²

Another marveled, "Even though it was dirty, [tourists] would come. It was **exciting** for them. They can't see things like this where they come from—pigs and rats and cats all roaming around on the streets." Adding to the street's unsavory/unsanitary condition was the fact that it was a muddy mess for half the year:

There used to be only stones and not this nice asphalt paving. The mud would go halfway up your leg. People had to walk on the sides of the road where there were bricks and you'd have to try to jump from one to the other. There was no sense of cleanliness and people didn't do much to keep it clean.

Nevertheless, by the mid-1960s Bishnu Shahi dreamed of expanding his business. Talking with foreigners, he came up with a plan to put his pie-baking skills to use:

I told my interest to them and they said, "Do it. We'll help you." "If you'll help me, I'll open it," I said. Without help, it wouldn't have happened. With their help I bought the oven and started this business. I worked very hard and for the first time I prepared an apple pie and asked them to **taste** it. Everyone was happy! They asked me to make more so I made four. They shared it and paid me all together. They loved it! Look, it's what they eat. Here we call it a *halvai* [South Asian sweets] shop. In America a pie shop is their sweets shop.

12. Boldface font indicates English words in otherwise Nepali speech.

With a 175-rupee loan Shahi bought a used “oven” that consisted of a tin box placed over a gas or kerosene burner. With it he started baking a variety of seasonal fresh fruit pies as well as meringue and cream pies. Unlike later imitators, he refused to use canned fruit. He also refused to share his secret recipes with their combinations of spices that were then unusual in Nepal and hard to get. With money coming in, in 1966 he upgraded his shop and hung out a signboard reading “Bishnu’s Chai and Pie.”

It was the first shop [of its kind] not just in this place, but in all of Nepal. I didn’t make up the name. One of my very close friends from California had the idea. What a good man. He was named Chris. At first people used to tease me because of this name: “Chai and Pie.”¹³ But later they had to admit that it was good business.

Unable to keep up with demand, Shahi bought a large gas oven from some departing Americans and was soon rolling out forty pies a day and, in peak season, up to seventy, all without hired help. Prices started around 1.50 rupees per piece and 25 paisa for tea (Raj 1973:29). Whole pies cost between fourteen and eighteen rupees for basic varieties and twenty to twenty-three for more elaborate types. “We had to use expensive **fresh chemicals** [spices/ flavorings] which we [had to] get from India.” “I didn’t get *so* rich,” Shahi said, but

I was doing it my own way, like we do here. I was feeding my children from this business. I didn’t have any bad habits and I kept my prices cheap. With that money I bought this house and land. I brought up my children and sent them all to school.

By the late 1960s word of Bishnu’s Chai and Pie had spread along the RTK and many travelers made a bee-line to the shop as soon as they hit town. “It was world famous,” said Shahi. “There was no one who did not know me. Sure there were others who started their own [pie-baking] businesses but, by God’s grace, they couldn’t make them as **tasty** as mine!”

The fact that Shahi’s neighborhood was the first in Kathmandu to receive an English name bears testimony to his role in shaping the city’s tourist geography. Known simultaneously as Pig Alley (for the wandering hogs) and Pie Alley (for Shahi’s shop), the names tourists gave the area convey the incongruous experiences they had there. Terry Tarnoff’s recollections capture this sensory dissonance very well. Visiting in 1970, Tarnoff describes approaching Shahi’s shop:

13. The name sounded strange to Nepalis because “chai” is the Hindi word for tea. The Nepali *chia* (CHEE-yah) would have been more appropriate, but it doesn’t rhyme with “pie”!

I walked past some dilapidated buildings and saw a bunch of naked kids running around with filthy faces and snotty noses. Nearby, a half-dozen pigs lolled about in muddy stink holes. . . . I nearly gagged from the smell of their filth, but that was nothing compared to the odors wafting out of an open latrine right next to the path. There was shit everywhere. . . . It was the filthiest, foulest, smelliest street in the world, and right in the middle of it, right where the buffalo, pig, and human excrement all mixed together into a big soufflé of shit, right there, was Bishnu's Pie & Chai Palace.

I pulled open a creaky screen door and stepped into a small, dark space. . . . I'd been trying not to breathe, but now I inhaled and was amazed by the sweet scent of cooked fruit and fresh-baked dough. . . . When I glanced over to see a counter filled with apple pies, lemon-meringue pies, and chocolate-mousse pies, I was quite certain that I'd lost my mind. "Apple pie," I whispered to the man behind the counter. "Will that be plain or with whipped cream?" "Yes! Whipped cream!" I laughed! That's when I heard a thump at the door. I looked over to see one of the pigs trying to nuzzle its way in. (2005:308)

Bishnu Shahi was perhaps the first Nepali entrepreneur to exploit tourists' longing for a taste of home, but many soon followed his lead.

It seems ironic that an untouchable man, from a neighborhood most locals deemed godforsaken, was among the first Nepalis to tap into the budget-tourist market. But, as an elderly low-caste man remembered, "Tourists didn't know about *jat* [caste status] so they didn't care where they stayed or where they ate." Bishnu Shahi conceded that his vicinity was primitive. "But still it attracted **hippies** because they had no *ijjat*." *Ijjat* connotes prestige, status, or reputation and is often linked to caste standing. For Shahi, saying that hippies had no *ijjat* was not an insult but a simple observation that he and they were willing to interact as social equals. While the Royal Hotel and other multi-star establishments were heavily invested in prestige (and literally dominated by Nepal's royal family), budget tourism started with interactions between tourists and Nepalis at the opposite end of the social/caste spectrum.

The Camp Hotel

When you talk about tourism in Nepal, it always has to start from Maruhiti and the Camp Hotel, from *right here*. RAJU MANANDHAR

Between 1965 and 1967, while Bishnu Shahi's tea shop morphed into a successful tourist restaurant, something similar was happening a few hundred meters up the road. There, in the predominantly Newar farming-caste neighborhood of Maruhiti, emerged the most famous of the early

budget tourist lodges. Along with the GC Lodge and the Globe, the Camp Hotel is a strong contender for the distinction of being the first budget lodge in Kathmandu.

In 1966 Chris Jeffers, an American Peace Corps volunteer assigned to work with Nepal's Ministry of Education in Kathmandu, needed an affordable place to live. From a Nepali colleague he learned of a Newar family in Maruhiti willing to take in boarders. Dwarika Prasad Manandhar and his family lived in a large courtyard house on a street leading from the city center to the edge of town (where Bishnu Shahi lived). In the early 1960s the family took in an elderly German student of Tibetan Buddhism who spent most of his time at Swayambhu. One of Manandhar's sons remembers how this German man

used to tell my dad, "You have a big house. Why don't you give more rooms to rent?" After a while one Peace Corps volunteer came and stayed here. His name was Chris Jeffers, an American, who spoke good Nepali. I remember this. That old man and also Jeffers used to bring people in small numbers before we really opened as a hotel.

Another son remembered the hotel's origins slightly differently:

It actually started with one foreigner who came in search of a place to stay. My dad used to speak Nepali¹⁴ and so did this Peace Corps guy. He was from America or Canada, I don't remember. . . . But it was that guy who suggested that we start a hotel since we had plenty of space. He also said that tourism was about to expand and he suggested that we open a place where people could "camp." He gave my father the idea to start the Camp Hotel.

The final precipitating factor was the arrival of Ravi Chawla, a young Indian entrepreneur from Bombay who, in his early thirties, had quit his job in public relations with Royal Dutch Shell when the Indian oil industry was nationalized, and moved with his wife and two children to Kathmandu in 1966. Chawla had "no plans [and] no knowledge of life there" (personal correspondence) but was looking for adventure away from "the pressures of normal life" (Bernstein 1970:71). Chawla rented a room for his family in the Manandhar home and soon began inviting other travelers to rent rooms as well. Recognizing a business opportunity, Chawla approached Dwarika Manandhar with a partnership proposal. "He had an interest in working with tourists," recalled one of the Manandhar sons. "He said, 'Give me a chance, I can do well.' His English was good and he

14. Many Newars at that time spoke only Newari.

was hard working. So my father made him manager.” The Manandhars remember him as “a very intelligent and clever person” with a good mind for business. With no formal contract, the Manandhars agreed to rent most of their house to Chawla who would then have complete control of the business. Simultaneously Chawla rented a ground-floor space across the street to establish a new eatery for budget tourists that would prioritize hygiene, good service, and low prices. In February 1967 English-language fliers went up around town advertising the new Camp Hotel and Restaurant in Maruhiti. Ravi Chawla quickly became not just the business’s public face but one of its prime attractions.

Initially the Camp Hotel consisted of several long dormitory rooms with raised platforms where travelers paid a rupee to throw their sleeping bag on a cotton mattress. Soon Chawla developed small private rooms for four (single) and ten (double) rupees (Chawla 1967:14) and eventually converted the entire house into a lodge (with the Manandhars moving to the nearby farming hamlet of Chauni). But even with fifteen rooms, demand outpaced supply. One of the sons recalled:

When we were running the hotel it was always **packed**. When they came and knew that there were no rooms left, they wouldn’t agree to go elsewhere but would ask us to put three tables together so they could sleep in the restaurant. For that we’d not ask for money but they wouldn’t agree. They’d pay and wait for two or three days until there were rooms available. They were generous and well-behaved.

Word of the Camp Hotel quickly spread along the Hippie Trail. “They’d see each other in Delhi and say come to this place. Our hotel didn’t run because of advertisements.” By the early 1970s the Camp Hotel was showing up in budget travel guides:

I used to ask them why and how they came to our place and they’d say . . . they knew about Camp Hotel because of books published in Sweden and Belgium and Denmark. This place was famous in the world.

With a wistful sigh, one of the Manandhar sons noted, “Those were strange but amazing [*anauto*] days. I don’t think they’ll repeat again. They’re like stories told by our grandfathers.”

The Camp Restaurant was one of the keys to Ravi Chawla’s success. Unlike the Globe Restaurant and Tibetan Blue, which served budget travelers but were originally for locals, the Camp Restaurant was (with Bishnu’s Chai and Pie) among the first local businesses to focus exclusively on foreigners. Prepared by a Tibetan cook and wait staff, the Camp Restaurant offered a

Hungry and thin we wandered in.
 Happy and stout we wandered out.
 —CAMP RESTAURANT GUEST REGISTER, APRIL 28, 1967

range of Western, Tibetan, and Chinese dishes. One of the Manandhar sons remembers that the highest-priced item on the menu (buff steak and chips) was only three rupees. A record player spinning Western classical and Rock music added to the ambiance. Even if they stayed elsewhere, many young tourists ate at the Camp Restaurant.

In August 1967 Doranne and Jerry Jacobson, a young American couple just finishing a several-year stint of anthropological field work in rural India, visited Kathmandu before heading home. Isolated from the growing youth radicalization back home, the Kathmandu “scene” was their first exposure to changes they had only vaguely heard about. In their trip diary they make special note of fashions on display at the Camp Hotel, trying to figure out what this new word “hippie” meant:

We moved into “The Camp”—not the town’s most luxurious, or even cleanest hotel—but interesting. Here is where the nomad Hippies congregate. Whether or not these bearded, often dirty, necklace-wearing boys (very few girls) are officially classified as Hippies we aren’t sure. . . . ’Tis said they come to K. in droves because hashish here is the best and cheapest in the world. The Camp is their hangout because it is quite cheap, has an attached restaurant, and the whole place has the atmosphere of a European youth hostel. (Jacobson and Jacobson 1967:4)

They were especially intrigued/appalled by one “fellow Camp-er,”

an effeminate French boy (whom I had originally thought was a girl) wearing a *filthy* kurta [loose fitting Indian men’s shirt], long frizzy hair, beads, bracelets, rings, long trousers dragging frayed ends in the mud, and bare feet. I suppose this is a hippie. (Jacobson and Jacobson 1967:15)

As for the Camp Hotel’s clientele,

hitch-hikers speaking French predominate! English no. 2, then Dutch. A few ordinary types like us, . . . some South African girls, etc. were also there. Actually cleaner and better hotels were available for the same money, but w/o the attached eatery and certainly not the camaraderie! (Jacobson and Jacobson 1967:4)

Further distinguishing “ordinary types” from hippies, the Jacobsons noted that “many of the Camp crew do nothing but sit around and smoke [hashish] all day,” whereas they diligently visited the valley’s major sight-seeing attractions during their one-week visit.

In November 1968, twenty-two-year-old English overland hitchhiker Steven Abrams climbed off a truck near the old post office, took a room at the GC Lodge, then headed to the Camp Restaurant because it was the “in’ place” to eat. Thin and half-starved, he had steak and chips for the first time since leaving home months earlier. Later he pigged out on apple and apricot pie from Bishnu’s Chai and Pie. Abrams reports meeting more “backpackers” at the Camp Hotel and Restaurant than anywhere else on the overland trail.¹⁵

Along with Karma, the endearing young Tibetan head waiter, Ravi Chawla was himself one of the business’s biggest assets. Untiringly sociable, outgoing, and accommodating, Chawla had a gift for making people feel comfortably at home. As a result, many ended up staying far longer than they had planned, and when they finally did leave, they spread the good word far and wide. From the business’s opening in early 1967 Ravi Chawla kept a visitors’ book in which he encouraged patrons to leave their names and comments. In it guests left amazing tributes to Chawla’s charm and hospitality, along with all kinds of jokes and doodles.¹⁶

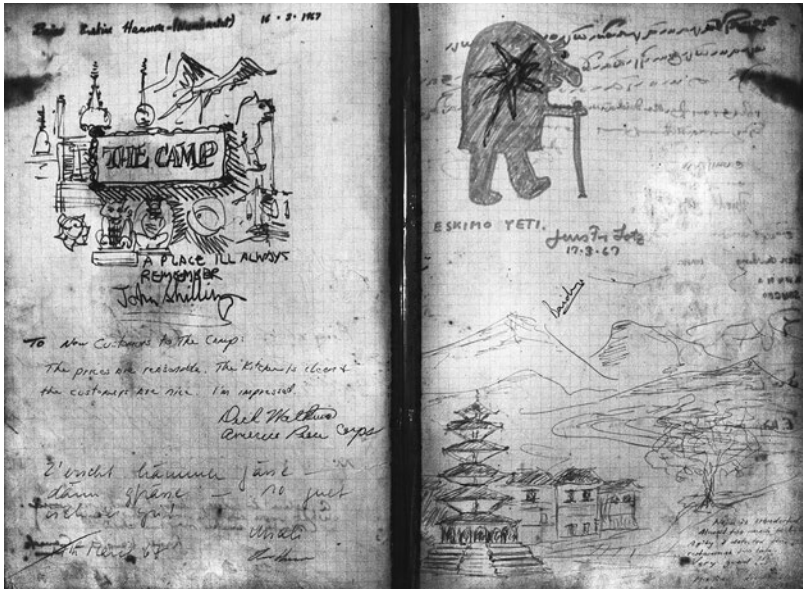
Even with low prices, Chawla was soon making what he described to me as “good money,” a fact that the Manandhar family was, apparently, aware of. Watching the business take off, by 1968 the Manandhar sons, increasingly unhappy with the deal Chawla had struck with their father, began trying to take a more active role the Camp’s management. Ravi Chawla was upset but recognized that there was little he could do as an Indian national with no claims to ownership or contractual rights. Relations grew strained and Chawla began looking for other business opportunities in Kathmandu, even while officially remaining the Camp’s manager until 1969.

One change that marks this shift in management was the Camp’s policy toward cannabis. From the beginning Chawla had not allowed cannabis use in his hotel or restaurant, a fact confirmed by grumbling complaints in the first visitors’ book!¹⁷ But with the Manandhars taking a more ac-

15. See <http://www.oland.co.uk>.

16. Ravi Chawla saved the very first of these visitors’ books, which runs from February 1967 to February 1968, and allowed me to have it photographed.

17. Ravi Chawla makes this point clearly in an undated British television news clip (from probably 1967) in which he states that the Camp aims to serve “travelers,” not “hippies.” See <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=544606018890524&set=0.154982454540999&type=2&theater>, accessed 1/25/13).



9 Page spread from the Camp Hotel visitors' book, March 1967. Courtesy of Ravi Chawla, photo by Naomi Liechty.

tive role, by late 1968 the Camp's attitude toward cannabis had switched completely. Numerous accounts describe a large chillum hashish pipe circulating among restaurant patrons, provided gratis by the management. One of the Manandhar sons defended their tolerance, even promotion, of cannabis:

Smoking ganja didn't mean doing whatever they liked. They used to do that for their own sake and listen to music. They didn't hassle anyone or harm anything. They used to ask us to open [the restaurant] for the whole night because they'd want to eat or drink tea quite frequently. They weren't like people now who drink [alcohol] and then cause trouble.

By 1969 the Manandhars had taken over the Camp's management. For the next decade they ran the business much as Chawla had, emphasizing hospitality and even maintaining Chawla's visitors' book tradition. Years later, Manandhar family members still have genuine affection for the people they hosted. They repeatedly recalled specific individuals who had stayed with them for months, even years, describing them as "like family." One person recalled how they often invited long-staying guests for a special meal at their own home before the guests departed. The family



10 Drawing from the Camp Hotel visitors' book, June 1967. Courtesy of Ravi Chawla, photo by Naomi Liechty.



11 Drawing from the Camp Hotel visitors' book, August 1967. Courtesy of Ravi Chawla, photo by Naomi Liechty.

still gets letters from people they haven't seen in decades, while others arrive out of the blue (often with children) knocking on the door of the long-since closed hotel, wanting to reminisce. Even allowing for nostalgia, interactions between Nepalis and visitors seem to have had a special quality in those early days. Aside from the very first one, the Camp Hotel visitors' books are now lost and all that physically remains of the Camp's heyday are doodles and drawings left on walls of rooms now rented to poor Nepalis. "These are the paintings that people did," said one of the brothers. "I didn't erase them. I try to keep them in good condition."

The Maruhiti Tourist District

Once businesses like Bishnu Shahi's pie shop and the Camp Hotel were up and running, two things happened: budget travelers swarmed into the vicinity, and other Nepalis jumped on the tourist-services bandwagon. Within months of the Camp's opening, lodges, restaurants, and copycat pie shops opened up in the neighborhood making Maruhiti the first real tourist district in Kathmandu.

Dozens of families (many of them low-caste Newars) opened their

homes to budget tourists. When the Camp was full, tourists would go door to door using sign language, asking if a family had rooms available. Said one woman, “We kept them for money.” Another recalled, “It was common for people to have lodges in their homes. You didn’t have to have a signboard or anything.”

But many *did* establish genuine businesses. A few doors up from the Camp Hotel, Madhukar Shrestha¹⁸ opened the Yeti Lodge in 1968, the second substantial hotel in Maruhiti. “Yeti was a big thing then,” Shrestha recalled. “People were talking about seeing yeti footprints in the Himalayas.” Soon others followed. The Hotchpotch and Matchbox Lodges, in low-caste (butcher and tailor) areas near the river, became well-known on the hippie trail as ultra-budget destinations (Tomory 1996:22). With eventually dozens of formal and informal lodges competing, a new niche occupation emerged: the bus tout. Young men hanging around the bus and truck terminus on the other side of town tried to drum up business for a particular lodge. “If they brought us a guest,” recalled one former hotel owner, “we’d have to pay them a day’s rate. If they stayed for only a day, it was a loss for us. But if they stayed four or five days, it was income.”

Other businesses also sprang up including eateries like the Tea Room, the New Style Pie Shop (also operated by an untouchable), and more ephemeral ultra-cheap restaurants. There were two licensed cannabis retailers: the Mustang Hashish Shop and the Shiva Hashish Center. Many of the more successful businesses were clustered around the Camp Hotel, making it the epicenter of the Maruhiti tourist district. Bishnu Shahi himself eventually moved his “Chai and Pie” up the street to Maruhiti where he struggled to make a profit in rented space.

By the late 1960s the percentage of overland hitchhikers was declining and ever more budget travelers arrived in their own vehicles (cars, vans, and motorcycles) from Europe or booked passage on impromptu hippie buses. Around 1969 the first commercial overland buses arrived in Kathmandu. (They had been driving from Europe to India for at least a decade.) People who grew up in Maruhiti remember the exciting spectacle of huge buses carefully backing down the narrow sloping road from Durbar Square to the Camp Hotel where Ravi Chawla offered special group rates. “It used to be like a *mela* [fair or festival] when they’d drive down,” said one man. “People used to come out and watch.”

The Maruhiti tourist district sprang up between 1966 and 1969 and continued to be a budget tourist destination well into the 1970s. But as arrivals continued to increase (by 30 to 40 percent annually through the

18. Shrestha is a higher, Newar merchant caste name.

late 1960s and early 1970s), the area could not keep up with demand, and gradually fell out of favor. On the opposite side of town from the bus terminus, the area was not ideally located nor could its narrow streets accommodate the growing numbers of vehicles. Few of the area's middle- to low-caste families had properties large enough to convert into business-scale establishments or income to invest in upgraded services (indoor plumbing) that would have kept them competitive. But even as Maruhiti's fortunes were dwindling, a new tourist district was quickly emerging in the centrally located Jhochétole neighborhood of Kathmandu, soon to be known as "Freak Street."

Conclusion: The Cultural Economics of Budget Tourism

This chapter has charted the emergence of budget tourism in Kathmandu during the mid- to late 1960s. It is a story of young Westerners—hippies, but also "ordinary types"—flocking to the exotic, cannabis-friendly, cheap, and welcoming streets of Kathmandu. It is also the story of Nepalis literally opening their homes and lives to people who were not just strangers, but (often) down-right strange. In chapter 9 I look more closely at what Nepalis thought of these strange strangers. Here I conclude by considering what the arrival of young budget tourists in the streets of the old city meant for nonelite Nepalis who, even as late as the 1960s and 1970s, had little direct contact with global economic currents.

It is no coincidence that low-caste people in marginal parts of the city were first to tap into budget tourism. Socially they had the least to lose and most to gain from associating with foreigners who, by high-caste Hindu logic, were as contaminated and contaminating as these low-caste people themselves. But they were also the ones with the most to gain from the peculiar economics of *budget* tourism which is, by definition, about low prices, low wages, and low profits. Nepali elites were wringing big profits out of wealthy package tourists efficiently shuttled through their allotted three-day, five-star stays; but there was little money to be made from budget tourists intent on spending as little as possible. It was only a matter of time before foreigners who didn't want to spend much met Nepalis who didn't want much.

Today it's hard to imagine that Kathmandu residents born in the 1950s and 1960s grew up at a time when (a) the majority of people in the city were involved in agricultural occupations that took them daily to fields outside the city; (b) many families were still weaving their own cotton cloth and making their own clothing; and (c) many families, though

usually well-supplied with food, were incredibly cash poor (cf. Toffin 2007). One man, born in 1960 into a Newar farming family, remembered how

we used to wear clothes hand-woven at home—made *on a loom, at home!* My grandfather used to make this. It was thick cotton cloth. Back then everyone wore that kind of cloth. At that time, where would we get good clothes? We didn't even have *chappals* [cheap plastic flip-flops].

“We knew all about saving,” he explained:

But how could we? A big load of vegetables would fetch maybe one rupee. A bunch of onions or garlic? Only a few paisa.¹⁹ That wasn't enough to buy hardly anything for a big family of maybe ten or twelve people. That money would go for buying salt, or fertilizers, or other absolute essentials.

“When I was young,” he continued, “one rupee in your pocket would make you a **hero** [like a film star]. A cup of tea cost four paisa. It was a big glass, not like now. One or two paisa would get you, like, an ear of roasted corn.”

When I was a kid if I asked my dad for even five paisa, he'd chase me around the neighborhood with a stick! Even for just five paisa! I mean making money was difficult. My dad used to work in the fields. We had all the food we needed from the fields, but we had a big lack of money.

Nepalis from the higher merchant castes were often embedded in large-scale cash and finance economies that were regional and even global in dimension. But for most Nepalis at the lower end of the social and occupational hierarchy, money was rare and precious.

This was the economic paradigm—food-secure but cash poor—that budget tourists stumbled into in the late 1960s. In this world the one rupee (about ten US cents) that a budget tourist paid to sleep on a local resident's floor seemed like a terrific bargain for both host and guest. Three rupees for a room at the Camp Hotel was incredibly cheap for budget tourists but, multiplied by many guests over many nights, it was a huge amount of money by local standards. Budget tourism represented the first exposure to international currency flows that many poorer Kathmandu residents had ever experienced. The fact that this money required contact with ritu-

19. Paisa: 1/100th of a rupee.

ally defiling foreigners was a problem. With no *ijjat* (prestige/honor) to lose, Bishnu Shahi was perhaps the first to overcome caste scruples to tap into financial currents that were beginning to break clear from the luxury hotels and swirl through the streets of Kathmandu. As others followed suit, the Maruhiti/Pig Alley area emerged as the first budget tourist district as cash began to flow through the lower end of Kathmandu's economy.

One of the most fascinating transformations wrought by budget tourism was the reallocation or reconfiguring of domestic and commercial space. In many ways, the meaning and value of domestic space was turned on its head with the arrival of budget tourism and a new cash-based retail economy. To grasp this one needs to understand how, historically, domestic space was used by Kathmandu Newars.

The main characteristic of urban Newar domestic architecture was verticality: in order to minimize sprawl (and save arable land) people built up, not out (Korn 1989:18). Most homes covered little surface area but were three or four stories high. As are many things in a caste society, the Newar home was (and often still is) understood in terms of a hierarchy of auspiciousness with the *least* pure area being the ground floor, and the *most* pure, the top. Historically ground floors were used for livestock, storage, or workshops; mid-levels for sleeping; and top floors for activities most susceptible to ritual defilement: cooking, eating, and worship (Korn 1989:23). Ground-floor spaces were often dark and damp, if not smelly and dirty. Because of their ritual and physical unpleasantness, ground floors often had unusually low ceilings rendering them even less functional.

In a 2007 interview, a seventy-year-old Newar man explained what he thought was the biggest change he had seen in Kathmandu in his lifetime:

Before, if you wanted to eat something, you had to go up three or four floors. The first floor was useless. Nowadays the first floor has become priceless. You earn more from renting the first floor than from renting the whole house! Before, they made it low because the ground floor was hardly even used.

Or, as another man put it, "Before tourists came Nepalis didn't have any interest in **restaurants**. Back then we'd only eat on the upper floors of the house."

Both of these men point to the role tourism played in transforming ground floors from "useless" to "priceless" spaces. Most shocking to Nepalis was the thought of *eating* on the ground floor. Yet in the mid- to late 1960s many Kathmandu residents discovered that tourists were willing to pay to eat food in a space that Nepalis considered abhorrent. If one's home happened to be in an area with tourist traffic, suddenly a once-worthless

ground floor area had serious moneymaking potential. Historically most of Kathmandu's commerce took place in designated market areas leaving most of the city's neighborhoods mainly residential. In the locations where it happened to take root (as in Maruhiti and Pig Alley), tourism radically transformed the use and meaning of urban architectural spaces. The rise of "Freak Street" is a classic example of this.

“Kathmandu or Bust”: Countercultural Longing and the Rise of Freak Street

And when you walk around the world, babe,
You said you'd try to look for the end of the road,
You might find out later that the road'll end in Detroit,
Honey, the road'll even end in Kathmandu.

JANIS JOPLIN, “CRY BABY,” 1971

The years 1968 and 1969 saw a convergence of factors that generated both a spike in tourist arrivals in Kathmandu and the birth of a new tourist district. By the early 1970s the area known as “Freak Street” (by tourists and locals alike) had become a leading destination in Asia for budget travelers of all sorts, but especially those with a countercultural bent. This chapter charts the rise of Kathmandu’s Freak Street budget tourist district.

In December 1968 Thai Airlines inaugurated passenger jet service between Bangkok and Kathmandu along with a global ad campaign highlighting that “this remote and desirable tourist destination was now open for business” (Dannhorn 1986:465). Even if it had already been “open” for tourism for a quarter century, the (late) dawning of the jet era in Nepal meant a dramatic increase in the potential tourist supply. Previously all air transportation to Nepal was via army surplus DC-3 “Dakota” aircraft—crude planes with few windows and passengers strapped to benches along the bulkheads (Morris 1963:49–50; Bernstein 1970:58). Whereas DC-

3s carried a maximum of twenty-eight passengers, Thai International's Boeing 707s carried 189 passengers (MB Shrestha 2000:32–34). Furthermore, these flights represented Nepal's first direct air link to a non-South Asian port. Previously all commercial flights into Nepal had originated in India making Nepal tourism both susceptible to India's political whims and little more than an appendage of the Indian tourist market. Because Bangkok was on most round-the-world tour itineraries, Kathmandu suddenly had a whole new market to draw from.

Although jets had been in commercial use for over a decade by 1968, what kept them out of Kathmandu was a combination of low demand (too few tourists to justify their use), short runways, and topography: surrounded by high peaks, Kathmandu was a difficult place to land large aircraft. Even after a multi-million dollar US grant in the mid-1960s doubled the runway's length to two kilometers (Skerry, et al. 1991:170), locals debated whether big planes could manage the tricky banking maneuvers (still) required to hit the landing strip. In March 1967 a Lufthansa Boeing 707 carrying German diplomats became the first jet aircraft to land in Kathmandu, proving it could be done (McDonald 2005:104). Even so, early Thai jets carried emergency drag parachutes that could be popped to slow the plane if it was in danger of falling off the cliff at the end of the runway!

Returning to Kathmandu after several previous visits, in 1970 Jeremy Bernstein noted "the all but incredible increase in the tourist trade in the last year" (1970:59). In fact between 1968 and 1970 annual tourist arrivals almost doubled (from 24,209 to 45,970) (Satyal 2000:10). The rising numbers and declining ages of tourist are, in part, due to improved air service and lower ticket prices. But, given that the late 1960s were extraordinarily significant and turbulent times for the Western (indeed, global) youth counterculture, and that it was countercultural youth flocking to Kathmandu, we need to briefly recall what was happening in the 1960s that set so many people on the Road to Kathmandu.

Across much of the world the 1960s was a decade marked by widespread antiauthoritarian dissent that coalesced into various forms of countercultural expression, often associated with youth. As they approached adulthood, many in the postwar baby-boom generation seemed profoundly disillusioned with the promises and lived reality of modernity. Many rejected the crass materialism and moral vacuity they associated with their parents' consumerist lifestyles. From Billy Graham, to Martin Luther King, to surging interest in Eastern religions, countless people rebelled, in one

way or another, against the perceived moral bankruptcy of the modern world.¹ If not most, then certainly a visible and vocal minority of young people set out on quests to shake off their parents' soul-crushing consumerism and their conformist religion.

In the context of an increasingly costly, brutal war in Vietnam, this same moral critique and antiauthoritarian resistance soon took aim at domestic and international politics as well. In the 1960s the anticolonial struggles associated with postwar decolonization movements across the "Third World" were fresh in people's minds and, in some cases, still ongoing. No matter how much the US framed its overseas interventions as anticommunism or "development aid," many young people understood US involvement in Vietnam (and elsewhere) in light of anti-imperialist struggles in places like Africa, Central America, and Asia. In this association the US often came across as imperialist aggressor, not a champion of freedom and justice. For a generation attuned to the moral implications of its government's policies, the Vietnam War was often not just a moral atrocity, but a personal affront and call to action:

I felt as if my whole generation had turned a corner and walked smack into a violent mugging, a rape in progress: the victim, a total stranger—small wiry, and ragged with odd, alien clothes, the bearing and whiff of the foreigner. . . . But—and this was the shock—the attacker was a man we all knew well . . . someone we'd admired vaguely without ever actually examining the basis for that admiration. What should we do? Stop! we shouted at first in horror and disbelief. Stop it! We saw what was happening close up, and we felt personally responsible. We felt involved. (Ayers 2001:64)

"We began to feel the Vietnamese in ourselves," said one youth leader (in Gitlin 1987:393). The more radical wings of the Western youth movements explicitly identified with leftist revolutionary movements around the world, especially with Mao Zedong and the youth-led "Cultural Revolution" underway in China (Elbaum 2002, Gitlin 1987:264).

Paralleling the emergence of the Vietnam War was the US Civil Rights Movement; inevitably the two became tightly intertwined. African American leaders saw the war's weight falling disproportionately on poor, Black recruits. They also saw racism as another kind of war, one fought to oppress their own people. Civil rights leader Bob Moses argued that "Justice and peace are twins . . . borne of the same desire, just as war is the twin of racism. To win peace, you've got to fight for justice" (in Ayers

1. Some see this as a "Fourth Great Awakening" echoing previous periods of intense moral/religious revival in American history (Fogel 1999). I am grateful to the late Peter D'Agostino for this insight.

2001:59). Violence in Vietnam and the American South sprang from the same system of injustice.²

In his (in)famous speech at Riverside Church on April 4, 1967, Martin Luther King condemned the US for being "on the wrong side of the world revolution" and wove together many of the threads of discontent that ran through the American counterculture. King condemned the "giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism" and called for "a radical revolution of values" (King 2001:157-8). Speaking of the war, King said:

Somehow this madness must cease. . . . I speak as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam. I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted. I speak for the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home, and dealt death and corruption in Vietnam. (2001:153)

He went on to urge all draft-age people "to seek status as conscientious objectors" (2001:156).

Today it seems shocking to hear such radical sentiments coming from the now-sanitized hero of the "I Have a Dream" speech. (And, no doubt, it was statements like these that led to King's assassination exactly one year after he delivered them.) King succinctly bound together the scourges of racism, militarism, and materialism and, in so doing, spoke for many countercultural youth calling for "a radical revolution of values." Many took the Civil Rights Movement as inspiration to fight other related forms of social injustice. The Women's Liberation, Gay Rights, and Native American Rights movements all gathered momentum during the 1960s, often borrowing language, imagery, and tactics directly from militant Black Power leaders.

The 1960s witnessed a potent convergence of numerous countercultural critiques that, in turn, led many youth into varying degrees of social and political activism. Centered mainly among white, middle-class "children of privilege" (Gitlin 1987:393) and often on college campuses, these youth countercultural movements can hardly be called mass movements. Even so, with the huge baby-boom generation coming of age and testing its power, many Western societies experienced a politicized "generation gap" like nothing before or since. The political nuances varied, but similar generational divides sparked social unrest worldwide from Mexico City, to Paris and Prague, to China and Japan.

2. Chinese leaders Mao Zedong and Lin Biao repeatedly issued statements throughout the 1960s "supporting the African American freedom struggle and linking it to the world wide anti-imperialist struggle" (Elbaum 2002:46).

Though they shared a language of “revolution,” “freedom,” and “liberation,” the youth counterculture seemed to split into (at least) two groups: those who sought *personal* transformation and those working for *political* transformation. Some sought to “free their minds” while others sought to mobilize for freedom. LSD guru Timothy Leary called on his generation to “turn on, tune in, and drop out” while activists like Abbie Hoffman wanted to “turn on, tune in, and kick ass!” (Leary 1990:268). This dichotomy hardly does justice to the complex sixties scene but does capture the dynamic that separated the “drop out” hippies from the “kick ass” Yippies³ and other activists. On one extreme were those that believed the larger world would only change as a result of changes from within. Needed was “revolution, not the revolution against the ‘given’ . . . but the revolution within the self” (Hollingshead 1973:194). On the other extreme were activists calling for street demonstrations, direct action, and even large-scale revolutionary mobilization.⁴ The Yippies didn’t attract Leary because of their negativity; his revolution would “question authority—with a smile” (1990 [1983]:381–82).

Whether loved or hated, Timothy Leary’s legacy is tightly tied to “drugs.” His lifelong campaign to promote psychedelic drug use earned Leary titles ranging from the “Johnny Acidseed” of American pop culture to—in US President Richard Nixon’s opinion—“the most dangerous man in America” (Mansnerus 1996). Through books, public speaking, and his well-publicized lifestyle, Leary advocated hallucinogens as harmless recreational activities at worst, and, at best, as means toward creative discovery, personal transformation, and enlightenment. Leary and many others saw themselves as following in the footsteps of earlier generations of artists and radicals who had drawn inspiration from “drugs.” Poets William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, and Percy Shelly experimented with opium; Charles Baudelaire, Edgar Allen Poe, Victor Hugo, and Alexandre Dumas found inspiration in hashish; and Arthur Rimbaud had his absinthe: many in the 1960s understood mind-altering substances to be (in the words of Leary’s mentor Aldous Huxley) keys to the “doors of perception” (1954). For some those doors opened onto a spiritual void they sought to fill through spiritual quests, often turning to Eastern religions. For others the “psychedelic experience” was largely an aesthetic experience captured in new forms of “Acid Rock” (Derogatis

3. Yippies were members of the larger countercultural movement but embraced a more politically active stance on social issues (Gitlin 1987).

4. Most people were somewhere in between, like John Lennon who famously sang, “When you talk about destruction, don’t you know that you can count me out, in,” in the Beatles song “Revolution.”

1996), psychedelic art, and groovy lifestyles exemplified by people like Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters.⁵ For still others, "drugs" were drugs: from passive, drop-out "potheads" to tragic heroin addicts, many ended up as "druggies" even though they may have set out on a nobler path.

Whereas the scientific community initially embraced LSD⁶ and a range of other psychoactive drugs as possible therapeutic agents, by the mid-1960s a series of scandals (like Leary and Alpert's experiments at Harvard) and a growing association between recreational drug use and the increasingly vocal youth counterculture all led to growing public condemnation and legal censure. In 1965 federal agents arrested Leary for possession of a half ounce of marijuana and eventually sentenced him to thirty years in prison (Leary 1990: 242).⁷ By 1966 the US and Britain had criminalized LSD and "the press was having a field-day on the topic. Pot and LSD were the new twin menaces of our Western kind of society" (Hollingshead 1973:176). In 1966 US magazines like *Newsweek* and *Life* ran cover stories on LSD and marijuana use though their negative coverage was more like advertising for the youth drug culture than anything else (Leary 1990:250). "Drugs" had become one of the most contentious points of conflict between the counterculture and "the establishment" with young people viewing government crackdowns on drug use as direct assaults on their personal liberties and lifestyles. For many, Richard Nixon's War on Drugs (officially launched in 1971 despite earlier skirmishes) was a thinly veiled war on youth aimed at criminalizing countercultural expression.

I have laid out something of the sixties ethos that Western youth brought with them to places like Kathmandu. But to understand the timing of the main youth exodus we have to look at the incredibly tumultuous events that took place between 1967 and 1970. By then an earlier, smaller wave of "black sheep" had already dropped out and headed east.

5. After his successful 1962 novel, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, in 1964 Kesey and friends set out on a cross-country tour aimed at introducing people to mind-altering substances like LSD. In an old bus painted with psychedelic designs (driven by Jack Kerouac's muse Neal Cassady), the Merry Pranksters toured the US staging impromptu "acid tests" aimed at "turning on" anyone willing to try their LSD-laced Kool-Aid (Wolfe 1968).

6. In 1943 Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann first produced Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), licked his finger, and unwittingly commenced the world's first LSD trip (Hofmann 1980:15-19). Sandoz produced and marketed LSD until it was banned in 1966 at which point amateur chemists took up the challenge. The most famous of these was Owsley "Bear" Stanley—one-time manager of the Grateful Dead—who produced over a million doses of high-grade LSD in his Berkeley bathroom in the late 1960s.

7. Leary spent about five years in jail before being pardoned by California Governor Jerry Brown in 1975.

But it was the violent and demoralizing years of the late 1960s that set masses of Western youth “on the road.”

By the end of the decade both the War in Vietnam and protests against it had escalated dramatically. In January 1968 North Vietnamese forces launched the Tet Offensive, drawing the US deeper into an already widely unpopular conflict. Shortly thereafter, President Lyndon Johnson, an advocate of US involvement in Vietnam, declined to seek reelection, raising hopes that popular, young, antiwar candidate Bobby Kennedy would be elected president. These hopes were dashed on June 5, 1968, with Kennedy’s assassination. That August, antiwar youth organizations staged huge protests at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago where pro-war candidate Hubert Humphrey became the party nominee. Chicago Mayor Richard Daley unleashed twenty-three thousand police and National Guard troops on demonstrators as world media broadcast the police brutality live on TV. In November Republican Richard Nixon won the election and the following March launched a massive bombing campaign over Cambodia and Vietnam. Government violence against antiwar protests symbolically peaked on May 4, 1970, when National Guard troops killed four student demonstrators at Kent State University in Ohio.

The same years also saw a rapid deterioration in race relations. In 1967 race riots in places like Newark and Detroit led to a period of violence and anger known as the “Long, Hot Summer” for African Americans. On February 8, 1968, state police fired on unarmed Black protesters demonstrating against segregation in South Carolina, killing three and injuring twenty-eight, most shot in the back. On April 4 Martin Luther King’s assassination in Memphis sparked rioting across America. “Fifty-five thousand troops were called out to quell the riots, and by week’s end twenty thousand people had been arrested, forty-six killed” (Ayers 2001:116). In October radical factions of the Students for a Democratic Society and the Black Panthers launched the “Days of Rage” in Chicago under the slogan “Bring the War Home.” In December 1969 Chicago Police murdered two Black Panther youth leaders, asleep in their beds.

The less-politicized wings of the counterculture were also mobilizing in ever growing numbers. Over several months San Francisco’s 1967 “Human Be-In” promoted an ethic of love, awareness, and compassion, attracting thousands of young people, entertainers like the Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead, and speakers like Allen Ginsberg and Timothy Leary. In what became the “Summer of Love,” thirty thousand young people descended on the city’s Haight-Ashbury district and the

word “hippie” entered the mainstream lexicon (Swanson 2007). In 1968 the Beatles’ celebrated pilgrimage to India (with their guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi) made South Asia the place to go for meditation, Eastern religion, and enlightenment. And in 1969, the Woodstock Music Festival brought half a million young people to upstate New York for “three days of peace and music.”

If the 1960s was a period of moral and political turmoil, it also offered the possibility of great progressive change. As more and more people mobilized, hope built that youth-led social and political movements would usher in a new era, an Aquarian Age in which values of peace, tolerance, and justice would prevail. With youth-led uprisings across the country and around the world many felt they were standing at a pivot point in history: with enough effort, they could overthrow the militant gerontocracies that were raping the poor and oppressed in their names.

For those not involved, it is hard to appreciate just how quickly these hopes for radical change were crushed and replaced by despair and anger. It seemed the tide of history was turning in early 1968: civil rights and antiwar forces were making progress, students in France were about to topple the government. Then came months of assassinations, terrible riots, police brutality, and targeted judicial harassment. Nixon’s election meant that, despite widespread popular opposition (not just from youth), the Vietnam War would continue and even escalate. Soon the Civil Rights and Black Power movements splintered (its leaders assassinated or imprisoned) and the antiwar movement foundered under intense pressure from the Nixon administration (and FBI) to suppress dissent. What some Americans viewed as a return to law and order, many politically active youth experienced as, in the words of one person I interviewed, “an impending American fascism.”

With their dreams smoldering around them, by 1969 progressive youth had a choice. They could embrace “Learyism” and pursue an apolitical spiritual “inner revolution.” They could join a commune and attempt to create, on a small scale, the utopian society they desired. They could turn the counterculture into a toothless “mod” fashion statement—the affected “Radical Chic” so mercilessly lampooned by Tom Wolfe (1970). They could risk everything and join an underground militant resistance movement like Weatherman (Ayers 2001). Or they could get a backpack and leave.

“Kathmandu or Bust”

The word had gone around on the underground, the most effective communication system in the Western world. In those days it was Kathmandu or bust. TOMORY 1996:185

In the late 1960s hundreds of thousands of young people from the Americas, Europe, the Commonwealth countries, and Japan left home motivated by a complex mixture of protest, disgust, and the desire to experience—and learn from—the non-Western world. Disillusioned with political movements, people set out on *literal* movements that, en masse, became social movements in and of themselves.⁸ Booming Western economies and strong currencies meant that a few months of work at home could support a traveler for many months on the road (Tomory 1996:xii). For many, life on the road was both escape and escapism: leaving home was about protest but also about living in the moment, about *being* “on the road,” becoming the *kind of being*—mobile, rootless, and intensely alive—that Kerouac celebrated. Largely unencumbered by either past or future, and (as foreigners) absolved of political obligations, many found the traveling life profoundly liberating and deeply addictive. People who set off for a few weeks came back five years later. Travel was an antidote to the ills of Western society with those suffering the most needing the heaviest dose.

Certainly the most famous road on which “to be” was the Hippie Trail or Road to Kathmandu linking Europe and North Africa with India and Nepal overland via Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan.⁹ Maclean (2006a) estimates that between the early 1960s and 1979, when the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian Revolution made the trip impossible, up to two million people traveled overland to the Indian subcontinent.

Setting off on the road to Asia typically involved working for a period in the US, Canada, Europe, or Australia, often for the summer and into the early fall. Then, with cash in hand and temperatures dropping, people headed to one of several hippie staging areas, usually warm spots like Majorca, the Greek islands, or Morocco: places with Beat Generation exile credentials. From there they drifted east to Istanbul, famed for its hashish and opium but by the late 1960s already cracking down on drug users. With restrictions growing, Istanbul quickly became not a destination but a stepping-off point for places farther east:

8. Arlette Peltant (1969:8) describes how, after May 1968, French student political radicalism quickly morphed into spiritual longing (and escapism) as tens of thousands of self-identified “hippies” set off for Nepal hoping to “see the face of God.”

9. David Tomory’s 1996 *A Season in Heaven: True Tales from the Road to Kathmandu* is the best documentation of the overland journey to Nepal in the 1960s and 1970s.

I would not have gone [East] if somebody hadn't come up to me and said Istanbul was magic . . . and then in Istanbul you'd meet somebody coming from further East, and they'd be saying to anyone who'd listen, "Go, It's far-out." What were you going to do, go home and be a chartered accountant? (Tomory 1996:9)

Many who made it to Istanbul by train or hitchhiking met people with private vehicles looking to head East and share expenses. Others hitchhiked the whole way, claiming to have come from Europe to South Asia on as little as six dollars (Tomory 1996:24). One hitchhiker I interviewed explained that this usually meant trucks and near-death experiences:

I mean why we aren't dead I don't know! I remember traveling on the top of a truck at night. It was so full there was no room in the cabin. So we slept on top of the cargo and put ourselves under the ropes that were holding the cargo, stuffed in sleeping bags. I don't know how we didn't die. But it was wonderful fun.

Initially there were no guides to the overland route but by fall 1968 the San Francisco underground newspaper *Berkeley Barb* was running a classified ad for the *Hitchers Overland Guide* that, for one dollar, offered tips on travel from Europe to Nepal.¹⁰ By 1970 the BIT Guide—an awkward, stapled collection of mimeographed sheets containing travel advice—was in circulation, followed in 1972 by *Asia for the Hitchhiker* (Shultz 1972), a pocket-sized how-to guide to the road between Europe and Kathmandu. That same year Australians Tony and Maureen Wheeler, traveling overland from London to Sydney, were struck by "the tremendous pent-up demand for a good guidebook to the so-called Hippie Trail" (Krakauer 1994:136). In 1973 they produced *Across Asia on the Cheap*, the first of hundreds of budget guides in what became their enormous Lonely Planet publishing empire.¹¹

Even with a guide, the Road to Kathmandu was not always pleasant: dysentery, hepatitis, skin diseases, intestinal parasites, and poor diet affected everyone—but women faced additional problems. Many reported being groped and otherwise harassed in Turkey and Iran, less so in Afghanistan, and again in Pakistan and India, especially if traveling alone. Though few, a surprising number of women did travel solo though, as one noted dryly, "not being blonde makes traveling easier" (PAR 11/26/74). Sometimes men intentionally chose not to travel with women in order not to "expend that much energy in guarding them" (Marnham 1971:58). Women often joined other travelers or paired off as couples out of romantic attraction

10. *Berkeley Barb* 7(13) (Sept. 20–26, 1968), p. 17.

11. For more on the early BIT Guides, Lonely Planet, and other guides to the Hippie Trail, see MacLean 2006b:146–49, 280–83.

or simply for companionship and mutual support. Heterosexual couples often claimed to be married out of deference to Asian notions of propriety.

Among those I interviewed, estimates of gender ratios on the hippie trail vary from three to ten men to every woman (cf. Tomory 1996:110). Once in South Asia that ratio was less skewed as women traveling by air joined overlanders as they spread out across the subcontinent. According to official Nepal tourist statistics, about 40 percent of arrivals were women though this figure is not disaggregated by age (Satyal 2000:21). Since the majority of elderly tourists were women, it's not hard to believe that the Kathmandu youth scene was lopsidedly male.

One factor that helped boost the number of women on the overland route was the institution of bus service between Europe and Kathmandu in the late 1960s. Although commercial buses to South Asia began as early as the late 1950s (Cunningham 1975:29), it wasn't until around 1967 that the first tourist buses made it all the way to Kathmandu.¹² At one extreme were the "freak buses," usually old commercial vehicles or school buses that were rehabbed, filled ad hoc with passengers, driven one-way to Kathmandu, and sold to Nepalis. One Kathmandu expat remembered how in the early 1970s "there were at least fifteen people running overland trips, three or four times a year, from Europe to Kathmandu. Then they'd sell the vehicles, fly back, and do it again." The no-frills direct route cost around \$100 to \$150 and took about two months.

At the other extreme were luxury tour operators like Penn Overland offering air-conditioned coaches, professional drivers, and experienced guides. In the mid-1970s its most expensive tour (including meals and the "best available" accommodations) cost £ 1,250 and attracted mainly rich Americans. (Penn also offered a cut-rate, camping-only youth tour from London to Kathmandu for £ 288.) A host of other operators (including Tangerine Overland, Magic Bus, Sundowners, Frontier, Encounter Overland, and Asian Greyhound) offered varying degrees of comfort and sightseeing possibilities. By around 1970 Kathmandu's New Road was frequently lined with overland buses including the massive four-wheel-drive vehicles that looked like double-deckers. One Nepali tourism expert I interviewed estimated that there were ten overland companies operat-

12. Traveling on a Sundowners tour bus Alderson claims to have been with a group that made the "pioneer attempt by a British coach to reach the capital of Nepal" (1971:164). Nowhere does Alderson say exactly when he arrived but his description of the Royal Hotel (which closed in 1969) means that it was between 1967 and 1969. One person I interviewed claimed that Penn Overland was the first company to drive into Kathmandu sometime between 1965 and 1967. The 1977 Pennworld catalog claims that their Marco Polo Explorer service from Europe to South Asia began in 1957. By the late 1960s Kathmandu was the endpoint of Penn Overland's Marco Polo tour but it seems unlikely that it had been from the outset.

Bus For Sale: 1965 Volkswagen Minibus. A lovingly maintained Home on Wheels, Excellent Mechanical Condition with New Engine. Contact Lloyd. Ravi's Spot, Jhochen.

—NOTICE IN *THE RISING NEPAL*, APRIL 1, 1969, P. 8.

ing in the 1970s, each with frequent departures from Europe, spring and fall. Combine these with the dozen or more independent operators, plus the many that came in their own vehicles or even hitchhiked, and it's clear that large numbers of people arrived in Nepal overland (cf. Satyal 2000:23).

For some the overland route was an extended sightseeing tour whose main attraction was its dozens of historic or scenic locations. The more upscale buses often had elaborate itineraries that zigzagged across Western Asia adding thousands of miles to the direct route. For them Kathmandu was just the last of a long list of Oriental cities to tick off before boarding a plane for home. But for others it was the *experience* of Asia and the *road itself* that were the real attractions. Plus, with thousands of budget travelers shuttling from Europe to Asia and back, the Hippie Trail became a veritable "hippie scene." Countless memoirs describe running into this person we wintered with in Greece, that person we hung out with in Isfahan, another we rode with to Peshawar, and so on. Tour bus sightseers tended to be older, wealthier, and isolated from this great hippie traveling party. Several people I met described how, as travelers, they themselves became tourist attractions. Sporting Persian jackets, Afghan hats, and Pashtun pants, and riding in old rattletrap vehicles, "freaks" often found tourist cameras turned on them as if they were another species of exotic local fauna.

After several months of roughing it on the Hippie Trail with poor food and water, too little bathing, and too much cannabis, budget travelers were ready to get to Kathmandu, halfway across Asia and the most far away and far-out destination on the road. Many describe the thrill of crossing the Nepal border and seeing signs for Kathmandu: "our first evidence of the promised land" (Marnham 1971:227). With thousands of exhausting miles behind them, minds reeling with new experiences, bodies rebelling, and the promise of rest (and apple pie) just ahead, the drive up from the heat and dust of north India toward the cool, green Kathmandu Valley really must have felt like an ascent to some minor paradise. Marnham describes one overlander who, after checking into the Camp

Hotel, spent his time “just relaxing, accustoming himself to the feeling that there was nowhere he had to go today, or tomorrow, or the next day; that his journey was completed, the pursuit evaded, and it was time to rest” (1971:232). Kathmandu was the end of the road and few people were in any hurry to return to the messed-up Western world from which they had fled.

Heading Out

Europeans could hitchhike from their doorsteps, or point their cars east and never turn back. But for North Americans, heading onto the Road to Kathmandu required forethought, money, and often, some precipitating factor. One American I interviewed, Paul,¹³ shared the story of how he broke out of his rut at home, and headed for Asia. Though unique, his story is not unlike what many others experienced.

By the time he graduated from college and took a corporate job in 1967, Paul was already torn between his financial desires and political ideals:

I lasted about a year before the sixties overcame me! I got politically active and then I got fired for long hair. Well, they *said* it was long hair but really it was because I was trying to organize a strike for better wages, after going to a [Black Panther activist] Huey P. Newton rally on how to commit revolution in corporate America.

Joining the Friends of the Black Panthers further opened his eyes to systemic problems in American society—“meaning, if you were black the doors didn’t open like if you were white.” He was also “fed up” with the political and the socioeconomic scene:

You know, 1969, mass consumption, commercialization of everything, the war, loss of values, all of that. Everything was just messed up. . . . I had a sports car, I had six credit cards: I was buying completely into the system. At some point I realized I was getting *entrapped* in this system and getting fired provided a way out.

Paul was twenty-three in 1969 when he flew to Japan. Once there, he vowed to travel only by land or sea as he headed further into Asia. “I wanted to experience something completely different.” He started “island hopping” across Asia, reading up on new places and cultures as he went. In

13. I have changed his name and some of his story to protect his identity.

Jakarta he spent several weeks working alongside a Muslim bicycle repairman and his family, fixing flat tires.

I guess I thought of myself as a political ambassador, a countercultural ambassador from America. I wanted to tell people of the America they had no idea existed, like about poor people, like Blacks and Hispanics, people who didn't have equal rights, and that there was discrimination, and all of that. People [overseas] just didn't understand that. They thought [the US] was some utopia. I wanted to show the dark and light side.

In Dacca he lived in a boarding house with Bangladeshi students. Everywhere he went he observed and learned from those around him. "That's one of the benefits of traveling. You just start doing things. It opens up your mind to different perceptions. Pretty soon you're not the same person."

Paul hadn't been much interested in religion, Eastern or otherwise, until a year or so before he left home.

I think it got started the first time I took LSD. My perceptions changed on everything. Drugs like that kind of sky-rocket you into another reality, another way of viewing things, a different perception.

Having read up on Hindu philosophy, yoga, and meditation while traveling through Southeast Asia, Paul arrived in India primed to join the Western youth dharma circuits that flowed around the subcontinent. After experimenting with gurus, taking meditation courses, and visiting pilgrimage sites, he joined a group of seekers traveling with American Hindu convert Baba Ram Dass (Richard Alpert).

For a year I just wandered barefoot around India with a *lotta* [small water jug], a bedroll, a few clothes, going to meditation courses, hanging out with Ram Dass. I guess I was kind of a half-devotee. Not a full-on thing. We'd stay in *dharamsalas*.¹⁴ We'd cook our own rice or make *chapattis* over a fire.

His health declining, in 1971 Paul finally headed for Kathmandu where he promptly entered the mission hospital, diagnosed with acute hepatitis. He soon recovered but other foreign patients—addicts on their last legs—fared less well in the hands of staff that, while well-intentioned, had no experience with treating drug addictions. "There were always stories

14. A free resting place for religious travelers or pilgrims.

of people dying in there because [hospital staff] didn't really understand what was going on." Once back on his feet, Paul rented a room on Freak Street and fell in love with Kathmandu—where he has spent most of his time ever since.

Having looked at something of the context of, and reasons for, the Western youth exodus to places like Nepal, we can now return to the story of Kathmandu's experience as host to hundreds of thousands of these people from the late 1960s onward. Chapter 6 described the emergence of Maruhiti as the city's first budget tourism enclave. But by 1969 Western youth were filling up a new tourist district: Freak Street was the end of the Hippie Trail.

Freak Street

Linear streets in Kathmandu traditionally had no names. Instead, the open areas where two or more streets intersected—known as *toles* or chowks—had names that designated that intersection and the neighborhood surrounding it. *Toles* and chowks were known for various kinds of markets, landmarks, and communities: the Asantole grain market, the Indra temple at Indrachowk, and so on. (Areas were also named for other features like public water taps [Maruhiti, Sundhara], monasteries [Ombahal], ponds [Khichapokhari], etc.)

The area that came to be known as Freak Street stretches perhaps one hundred meters between Jhochétole (also known as Jhochhen) and Basantapur, the plaza south of Kathmandu's Durbar Square. Literally in the shadow of the old royal palace, this area was home to prosperous, upper-caste Newar Shrestha merchant families, many of them involved in long-distance trade, light manufacturing, or civil service during and following the Rana regime. For families with ties to Tibet, the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950 meant the gradual closing of ancient trade routes and the end of commercial relations that had flourished since the seventh century (Tuladhar 2004:97). When the first road into the Kathmandu Valley opened in the late 1950s many Shrestha families reinvested their capital in long-distance freight hauling. By the early 1960s the neighborhood was known for its mechanic shops and trucks that lined the street at night.

Around 1966 one of the earliest budget tourist lodges—the GC Lodge—had opened up on a side street not far from Jhochétole. Centrally located, and with tourist numbers swelling, the area saw more and more tourist

traffic. Watching this flow, in early 1968 one family began contemplating the idea of opening a hotel. Just a teenager at the time, Jivan Lal Shrestha still remembers his family debating the idea:

“We have this huge house, and we don’t need it,” [my father said]. I mean, we had maybe twelve people living in thirty-eight rooms! So my Dad said, “Why don’t we build another staircase and divide the house up? The family can stay in one part of the house, and the remaining portion we’ll partition into rooms.” That’s what happened.

But Jivan’s grandfather—still head of the extended family—rejected the idea. Two years earlier the family had bought property in Kupondole¹⁵ in hopes of renting to foreigners, but the house had remained empty. His grandfather argued:

We have an empty house in Kupondole, we have no money, and now you’re suggesting that the house we *live in* you will convert into a lodge? Who in the hell is going to come stay in this lodge? These guys are so tall they’re going to bump their heads into everything! No. You’re not going to do that.

But grandfather was also a businessman and eventually saw the proverbial writing on the wall, which said “tourism.” “So one day he calls my Dad and says, ‘I’ve thought about it. I think it makes sense. All this space is just being wasted.’” So in late 1968 they hired carpenters and began constructing the Oriental Lodge, the first tourism-related business on the street.

Here Ravi Chawla reenters the story. Chawla was the charismatic young Indian entrepreneur who, as manager of the Camp Hotel and Restaurant, had helped turn Maruhiti into a thriving budget-tourism district. “I still remember what happened,” Jival Lal Shrestha told me:

For some reason there was a very nice, tall, handsome Indian guy, educated in England, who came to Nepal in those days just like all the other tourists. Ravi Chawla. He was amazing. Everyone came to see him. . . . [People would say,] “You go to Kathmandu, you’ve got to meet this Ravi guy.” He was very, very popular.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, by 1968 Ravi Chawla was under increasing pressure from his Nepali landlords to share the Camp Hotel’s management, and profits. Looking for a better business opportunity and seeing the Oriental Lodge under construction, Chawla approached the

15. Kupondole was then a largely undeveloped, semirural area south of Kathmandu on the road to Patan.

Shrestha family patriarch with an offer to rent the property and manage the hotel, only to be turned down. “Who is this guy anyway?” asked grandfather. “No, we’re not interested.” Not dissuaded, Chawla kept knocking on neighborhood doors and soon rented a large ground-floor space just down the street. In early January 1969 he opened Ravi’s spot [*sic*], a restaurant that, because of Chawla’s fame, was immediately successful. Four months later the new Oriental Lodge was up and running. Between the two new businesses stretched the area that would soon be called Freak Street.

With around forty rooms the Oriental Lodge was the largest budget hotel in Kathmandu when it opened. Just a few steps from Durbar Square and close to the area where tourists disembarked from airport buses and vehicles coming from India, the Oriental Lodge was well-positioned to draw tourists away from Maruhiti.

But almost everyone agrees that it was Ravi Chawla and Ravi’s spot that really shifted budget tourism’s center of gravity in Kathmandu. Among local business people, Chawla’s name is legendary. A local hotel owner remembered,

Ravi was very **standard** [classy]. I knew him, he was a very good person. He had perfect English. He had experience with the restaurant business from the Camp [Hotel]. . . . It was only when he came [to Jhochétole] that many tourists came. [Before him] there wasn’t anything that was a real restaurant.

Another businessman told me, “He was the guy who made this area popular. Once he started many tourists moved over here.” Businesses attracted more businesses and by 1970, with budget tourist numbers soaring, Freak Street had become a hive swarming with all manner of youth from straight-laced world travelers to far-out hippies.

Ravi’s spot literally set the tone for what became the Freak Street ethos. Like his Maruhiti restaurant, Ravi’s spot boasted a sound system playing the latest popular music. One person who grew up in Jhochétole remembered:

Believe it or not, the Beatles *White Album* was there at that time. It’s not that he didn’t have other records, but somehow that was playing *a lot* at Ravi’s spot. And, as usual, there used to be [poor street] kids hanging around outside the restaurant—some [tourists] would take them inside and buy them breakfast or a meal or whatever. Most of those kids knew every song, word for word, by heart!

More well-to-do Nepalis were also attracted by the music:



12 Advertisement for Ravi'spot, 1969. Courtesy of Ravi Chawla, photo by Naomi Liechty.

There was a famous restaurant called Ravi'spot. It used to be sooooo smoky there but I used to go because I was so fond of English music and we couldn't get it anywhere else. There **tourists** and **hippies** used to bring music to play so we could go there to listen to the **latest, latest** music, like Bob Dylan. Going there was just heavenly [*ananda lagne*] even though the smoke used to **irritate** us a lot!

Ravi's spot flourished but Ravi Chawla himself underwent a personal crisis that involved a foreign woman. In July 1969 he left Nepal for good, traveling overland to Europe where he worked and studied for several years in Germany and France. Left behind, Chawla's wife soon sold the business which closed several years later. By that time there were so many other restaurants in the area that it was hardly missed.¹⁶

As in the Maruhiti area a few years earlier, new lodges and hotels sprouted all over the Jhochétole neighborhood. With tourist numbers climbing, and many people staying on for weeks and months, lodges filled up as soon as they were built. Soon people in neighboring communities were hanging up hotel signs outside their homes. Even dark, narrow back alleyways—places where locals dared not go after dusk for fear of ghosts—started boasting tourist lodges. *Kanwancha Guli* [Skeleton Alley in Newari] had several lodges, its evil spirits seemingly disenchanted by tourist dollars. One old man recalled his childhood, when no one went out at night. “But after the tourists came, the ghosts went away. Now we Nepalis spend so much time out at night that *we* are the ones who have become like ghosts!”

Most of the old Freak Street area hotels are now long gone though some—the Monumental Lodge, the Annapurna Lodge, the Himalayan Guest House, and a few others—hold on, offering throwback experiences to new generations of tourists looking to relive the hippie heydays. In 2004 I interviewed Suman Shrestha whose Century Lodge opened in 1972 just off Freak Street. In the early days, he told me, the average stay was “a couple months” but that one person stayed a year. “One year in one room! Can you imagine?” I asked if tourists did things like sightseeing, trekking, meditation, or what. “No, no. Not like that,” he said:

See, they just want to smoke. That's all. No aim, nothing. They don't want to go trekking. They don't want to go see the Monkey Temple [Swayambhu]. They just go to the room and smoke from morning to night.

Still, Shrestha remembers developing close friendships with many guests:

Some of those people come *every year*, from '72 when I opened, still now I have this kind of guest. From Switzerland there are two couples: each and every year they come here and come visiting. They bring whisky and we enjoy and . . . Ah, just like a family relation!

16. Ravi Chawla returned to India in 1973, rejoined his wife and family, and launched a successful career in journalism and marketing.

One fascinating glimpse into hippie-era Kathmandu and the mindset of young budget travelers who frequented Freak Street is a series of hand-painted murals on the walls of the old Oriental Lodge, now gone but preserved on video film.¹⁷ A collection of wall-sized doodles, the images include a large Rolling Stones out-stretched tongue carefully dated August 2, 1969. It’s easy to imagine a bunch of bored kids holed-up in the hotel during a monsoon downpour, doodling on the walls. One mandala-like image, filling most of a wall, centers on drawings of sun, moon, and stars with the words “Dream baby, Dream.” Arrayed around the central image are dozens of words like “love,” “joy,” “compassion,” “feel,” “touch,” “laugh,” “yes!,” “heal,” “mind,” “ohm,” “sex,” “chill,” and “smile.” Around the perimeter are words for cannabis: “pot,” “dope,” “weed,” “spliff,” “doobie,” “ganja,” “grass,” “skunk,” “herb from jah,” and others. Across the same wall are other elaborate doodles and carefully drawn slogans: “Doobie or Not Doobie, There is no Question,” “Just Say Yes,” “Love,” “Om,” “Find Truth,” “See all things as Nirvana, all people as Buddha, all sounds as Mantra,” and “Om Mane Padme Hum.” Nearby is a large, elaborate image of the divine Hindu couple Shiva and Parvati drawn in a slightly erotic comic-book style. But instead of their traditional ritual objects, the deities’ many hands clutch beer mugs, highball and martini glasses, long cigarette holders and lighters, wads of money or perhaps playing cards, and other unidentifiable objects. The murals show a wonderful mixture of earnest sincerity, bold irreverence, and general goofiness. Even in depicting various South Asian motifs, the artists seem to be laughing at themselves more than at their hosts.

The cannabis theme comes through in a carefully hand-drawn spoof menu panel on a nearby wall. Headed “Chill*Menu*Chill,”¹⁸ the menu features:

- Vegetarian: Hash Momo (black or brown)
- Grass and Cheese toast (seeds or no)
- Fried Doobie w/ egg (Rizla included on top optional)
- Juicy Mushroom Shake
- Dal Pot¹⁹
- No Name—But Gets You Stoned

17. Images of this wall mural appear in Shekhar Kharel’s 2003 documentary entitled *Kathmandu Odyssey*.

18. “Chill*Menu*Chill” may be a play-on-words reference to the Hindi song “*Dum Maro Dum*” featured in Dev Anand’s 1971 film *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* that was shot in Kathmandu, with hippie extras, in 1970 (see chapter 8). If so, it would date this satirical menu to 1971 or thereafter.

19. “Dal Pot” is a play on *dal bhat*, the Nepali national meal of lentils and rice.

Chemical: Chef Special—Acid Jazz-min Tea
 House Suggestion—Magic Masala (18+)
 Chill Room # 6—Payote Pizza (Pagoda Surprise)

Management not responsible for your mental health. Price subject to availability.

This dream menu suggests what was on (and in) many people's minds.

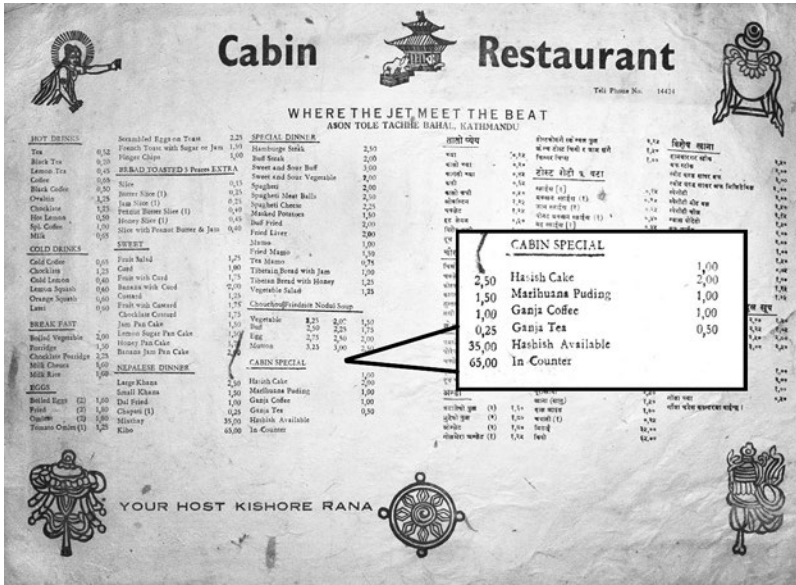
By the late 1960s a new kind of tourist restaurant appeared offering cannabis products literally on the menu and intentionally fostering a psychedelic ambiance. Probably the first was the Cabin Restaurant, opened sometime in 1969 at the end of a small alley near the busy Asantole market. An early guidebook describes the Cabin as "frequented by hashish smokers. . . . There are psychedelic posters and the room is usually full of smoke as western music is played loudly throughout the evening" (Raj 1973:29). Another visitor described the Cabin as "a magnet at the end of the overland hippie trail," offering up Chinese, Indian, Tibetan, and Western food "to the pounding music of the Beatles, Rolling Stones, bhajans, and what-have-you. But the infamous specialties of the house are *charas* cakes and 'joints.'" (Colaabavala 1974:7). He continues:

The Cabin is a groovy place, bizarre, loony. Its walls are plastered with wacky pictures and witty slogans cut out from old magazines. One sign reads "Make Love Not War." . . . One placard reads "Keep the World Beautiful—Stay Stoned." "There is so much *charas* being smoked that you could get stoned just sitting here," said a Nepali. The atmosphere is more like a tribal gathering. (1974:8)

On July 16, 1969, Englishman Michael Hollingshead—colleague of Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert, friend of Allen Ginsberg, and self-proclaimed "Man Who Turned On The World"²⁰—touched down in Kathmandu. Having never before visited Asia, Hollingshead went through an initial bout of culture shock but soon "the beauty of the valley began to exercise its subtle magic" (1973:220). Also working its not-so-subtle magic was the city's fabled hashish for which Hollingshead flew, arrow-like, to the Cabin Restaurant. "It was up a tiny alley, dustbin dirty and smelling of cow shit and urine," but it was "an extraordinary place" nonetheless (1973:222).

There was pop music on twin speakers, very loud, and a few stone-topped tables at which were gathered a group of perhaps fifteen young Westerners, silent, smok-

20. Hollingshead was an early LSD aficionado and credits himself with having introduced Timothy Leary (and thousands of others) to LSD, as described in his 1973 memoir *The Man Who Turned on the World*.



13 Cabin Restaurant menu, ca. 1970. Courtesy of Jim Fisher, photo by Naomi Liechty.

ing chillums, and oblivious. They were dressed in a gay medley of Indian, Tibetan and Nepalese costumes, bedecked with beads and beards. One of them looked up, smiled, and handed me a chillum, which I smoked. The effect was instantaneous—I almost passed out, and had to sit down. . . . The hash was the strongest I'd ever had. (Hollingshead 1973:222–23)

A few months later, British pop sensation Cat Stevens arrived in Kathmandu. Following successful debut albums in 1967 Stevens exhausted himself while on tour in 1968, dropped out of the music scene, and took the Road to Kathmandu where he arrived in late 1969, apparently sans entourage, blending in with the long-haired crowd. Stevens stayed at the Camp Hotel but frequented the Cabin, a spot that he mentions by name in the song “Katmandu,” released in 1970 on his US breakthrough album *Mona Bone Jakon*. The final stanza goes:

Pass me my hat and coat
Lock up the Cabin
Slow night, treat me right
Until I go, be nice to know.
Katmandu, I'll soon be seeing you,

And your strange, bewildering times
Will keep me home.

Stevens returned home in 1970 with so many new songs that he released three albums in just fifteen months. “Katmandu” was only the first of many pop songs that mention the city by name,²¹ all of which helped cement its reputation as a far-out destination.

Many people who grew up in the Asantole neighborhood have vivid memories of the Cabin from their youth. One local merchant, now middle-aged, recalled:

[People] used to come there and dance at the Cabin restaurant. It was a different kind of dance—Santana, Jimi Hendrix, like that. It used to be open from early morning until 11:00 or 12:00 at night. We had our home here. We lived right upstairs. I’ll tell you, it was so loud that no one could even *think* about going to bed before 11:00 or 12:00! We saw all these things but we didn’t really understand what was going on. We used to go there and watch them dance, but we were just kids.

There was **art** and paintings on the walls of the Cabin. They’d take drugs and under that influence they’d do different kinds of painting from their imaginations. I don’t know what kind of **art** that was. When you looked at those paintings you’d see many different things. Now it’s all gone.

Another local man said:

I used to go there as a kid. Tourists used to go there for **happy life** and to get blissed out. But it was especially the music that attracted many of us. This was the time of Santana: like “Black Magic Woman”—that was very popular here. Also Jimi Hendrix. **Hippies** used to just sit there [in the Cabin] and have tea and coffee, and coffee and tea, and smoke and smoke, and eat cake with hashish. They just wanted a **free life**.

Probably the most intriguing memory of the Cabin came from a man who had grown up nearby. He explained how, by the early 1970s, the Cabin had become a stop on elite tourists’ sightseeing tours that included visiting temples to watch local people worship or sing devotional songs. “I remember the five-star tourists—five or six cars would come every evening. They’d bring the tourists from the Soaltee to show them this Cabin Restaurant. Then drugs were legal and they used to bring and show what these hippies were doing!” The hippie subculture—exemplified by the

21. These include Janis Joplin’s song “Cry Baby” and the Bob Seger hit “Katmandu.”

Cabin Restaurant—had itself become a local tourist attraction for elite travelers intent on taking in the exotic wonders of the East.

Back on Freak Street, new businesses were opening up left and right. The most basic were street merchants peddling their wares literally on the pavement. Even hippies on a budget couldn't resist picking up a few souvenirs from these curio merchants. Nepali craftsmen had been producing souvenirs for centuries: everything from cheap mementos sold to religious pilgrims visiting sacred sites in the valley, to exquisite (and costly) hand-cast devotional images that were traded around Asia (Teague 1997:183). Local metal workers soon learned they could cash in on the tourist trade by producing small, rather crude religious images that could be easily stashed in a backpack.

The first curio dealers laid out their wares around the temples in Durbar Square, the area with the heaviest tourist traffic. From the start most of the curio merchants were low caste. "We didn't have any other means to earn money so we started running after the tourists," said one man who estimated he had been in the business since the mid-1960s. He remembered a kind of early golden age:

Then there used to be a few old tourists coming with guides. We had good conversations with them. They were good people and they also used to pay in dollars. Some would give ten dollars for things! Business was going well but then other people started and tourists were pulled here and there and business went down.

Voicing a lament that dozens of other merchants echoed, he described how

before, the tourists used to pay the price that we asked. Now they ask to reduce it by 60 or 70 percent. Their guides teach them that if we ask for ten dollars, they should give us 100 rupees. And the guides have their own contacts in the hotel shops where they get commissions. It's because of these guides that our business has been ruined.

"Even if we ask the real price, they'll ask to reduce it," he complained. "From a needle to an airplane one has to make a profit if it is to be a business."

By the late 1960s police began harassing these low-caste street merchants. "We'd lay things out on newspapers but police would come and chase us away," remembered one man. A few people started selling their goods in Basantapur square, the market area at the north end of Freak Street:

So we just stayed here. Previously this used to be a vegetable market and it was all muddy and dirty. But somehow we managed to keep our business going. Later others joined us and this [curio] market expanded.

By around 1970 there were so many souvenir dealers in Basantapur that Newar produce merchants were forced to go elsewhere to sell their vegetables as their old market turned into a prime tourist zone.

Some merchants in the Basantapur curio market started off literally selling old junk. One low-caste dealer explained how, as a boy, he “used to search for small things and try to sell them to tourists.” He discovered that tourists would actually buy broken kitchen utensils, beat-up baskets, antiquated padlocks, rusty knives, chipped ceramic pieces, leaking water jugs, and other things that people were throwing out.²² Many a Kathmandu cast-off ended up as “primitive folk-art” on a living-room shelf in Europe or North America. One merchant explained how

when tourists bought these things then eventually—slowly, slowly—they started *making* things that just *looked* old to sell to the tourists. In the beginning there was no such producing, but just selling what people had in their homes. It only became an industry when people realized that they could make a profit. Now they’ve learned how to *make* “old” swords, padlocks, knives, that kind of stuff.

Another curio dealer remembered that a hot item at that time was Chairman Mao’s “Little Red Book.” Merchants would pick up free or very cheap English copies at the Chinese government-run bookstore and sell them for good money to curious (and often sympathetic) young tourists.

Because young travelers often had little money to spare, from early on many of their transactions (especially in the souvenir trade) were in kind, not cash. In the Basantapur market the adage “one person’s trash is another’s treasure” went both ways. A tourist might exchange some ratty jeans for a dented water jug—with both sides feeling they had gotten a bargain. The tourist went home with a rustic souvenir and the merchant sold the jeans to eager Nepali youths who paid high prices for Western clothing.

Basantapur quickly turned into a full-fledged flea market as young tourists made a little money selling off unnecessary goods. Dozens of people I spoke with remembered how tourists, especially those who had arrived overland, would show up with items to sell. “They used to come

22. This was the time when, across South Asia, people were replacing old wooden, ceramic, and metal housewares with plastic equivalents which were lighter and more durable.

from Germany and Europe and bring buses full of things," said one man. "Before that we didn't have access to these tourist things and we valued them a lot. Even for **jean pants**, we had to buy them from the tourists." Another remembered, "At that time **Levis** were impossible to find in the market. But wearing **jean pants** and **jean jackets**, people would look at you and say, 'Whoa! What a **hero!**' People would pay *anything* for those: 100, 150, even 200 rupees." Another person who grew up on Freak Street explained how

the tourists used to come to Basantapur and have an auction—you know, selling their things: old records, tapes, shoes, watches, whatever. We couldn't get jeans so I used to buy, like your old jeans, even if they didn't fit me. I'd take them to the tailor and say, "Rip out everything and redo the whole thing in my size." That was the only way to get Levis! So tourists would just drive into Basantapur because they heard that was the place to get rid of stuff. They'd just stand on their bus, hold something up, and say "Anybody want to buy this?" And somebody would come by and buy it. I mean anything, anything, anything.

Once they had sold off their extraneous items, tourists often sold their vehicles as well. Basantapur often looked like a used-car and bus lot as tourists tried to raise cash for a plane or bus ticket back to the West.

Whereas small-item transactions might take place in Nepali rupees, most tourists were unwilling to sell vehicles for nonconvertible local currency. Tourists wanted "hard currency" which in turn spawned another vibrant segment of the local street economy: the illegal black market in foreign cash. Because Nepalis needed hard currency for certain major transactions (buying vehicles among others), and because Nepalis were then not officially allowed to privately hold foreign currency, the demand for foreign cash was high with people willing to pay for it far above market rate. The exchange rate tourists got for their German marks, British pounds, or US dollars was considerably higher on the black market than at government-run currency exchanges. Eventually the currency black market bankrolled many other illegal schemes, notably smuggling operations dealing in gold, consumer electronics, and other high-value goods. Until recently (when currency regulations were relaxed) just about any foreigner venturing into one of Kathmandu's tourist districts was sure to be trailed by people whispering, "Change money?"

Another distinctive part of the Freak Street merchant scene was its range of food vendors. Most started out small and stayed that way, but a few became major players in the local economy. One such was Mohan Das Mulepati who as a teenager, along with several brothers, started selling

yogurt to tourists in the Basantapur market. The Mulepati brothers were from Bhaktapur, the ancient Newar city east of Kathmandu, famous for its creamy, slightly sweetened buffalo-milk yogurt. Around 1970 the Mulepati brothers began bringing in Bhaktapur yogurt—carried in earthen pots slung from shoulder poles—to sell to hungry foreigners. With business going well, they rented a ground-floor space facing the Basantapur market and opened the Himali Yoghurt Shop. The business soon changed its name to Himalayan Cold Drinks as the Mulepati brothers began specializing in making lassi, a popular South Asian yogurt-based drink. “We even made **milk shakes** from lassi which the tourists asked for and taught us how to make,” said Mohan Das. By around 1973 the business became the Himalayan Cake Shop: “They taught us how to make cakes and pies.” Reminiscing about early popular tourist businesses, one man who grew up in the area remembered how

those boys from Bhaktapur, they made a lot of money. They’d sell yogurt and the tourists loved that Bhaktapur yogurt. I mean, we love it too! But they [tourists] would sit, relax, eat lots of yogurt, and use ganja. I remember they’d burn a candle and it would melt down like a little mountain, a mountain of candle wax. It was dim, there was music playing. It was so pleasant doing that.

Located right on the market square, the Mulepati brothers were ideally situated to enter the vehicle trade. Soon they were making even more money as vehicle brokers and by the late 1970s they had purchased property just off of Freak Street where they built the Himalayan Guest House which is still run by Mohan Das. One of the old curio dealers in the Basantapur market sighed as he remembered how Mohan Das

used to bring *dahi* on shoulder poles, and now look at him! He’s made a lot of money and now even has the Himalayan Guest House. When they [the brothers] were over there selling *dahi* from shoulder poles, we were sitting here watching them. Now look at how far they’ve progressed, and we’re still sitting here doing the same thing and watching them!

Another less savory rags-to-riches story involves D. D. Sharma, a man who started out as a street peddler, made a fortune selling cannabis (legally and, after 1973, otherwise), and eventually fled Nepal. Dev Dhatta Sharma moved from far-western Nepal to Kathmandu in the late 1960s. In spite of his high-caste background, Sharma started out at the bottom of the commercial heap selling his own home-made tomato products from the back of his bicycle. Sharma’s brother-in-law recalls:

He prepared **tomato sauce**. He knew how to make it. He collected small bottles from the market and he put sauce in them and sold them to restaurants and lodges. I don’t know all of it but he also used to make tomato and chili *achar* [chutney]. He walked with his cycle through [various parts of the city] to sell. At night he’d go back to a rented room and make some more. When there were small hotels and tourists in the Jhochétole area, he used to come follow them and ask if they wanted to change money. He knew money changing was profitable and with this he grew to a small shop. It wasn’t any big business. He started out small!

A shrewd businessman, Sharma quickly sensed the earning potential of tourism and learned that the real money was in marketing directly to tourists—not in supplying Nepali-run businesses. At some point he dropped the tomato products and shifted to the cannabis trade. Though certainly not the first to sell cannabis to foreigners, he was probably the first Nepali to focus exclusively on tourists and market aggressively. It is also likely that his roots in western Nepal—the area that produced most of Nepal’s cannabis—gave him access to producers, helped cut out middlemen, and improved his profit rates.

D. D. Sharma opened his famous Eden Hashish Center sometime around 1970. He rented a building in a prime location at the head of Freak Street, facing the Basantapur market. There were already many government-licensed cannabis dealers in Kathmandu though most of these had, at least historically, served a Nepali clientele.²³ What made the Eden Hashish Center different was its attractive showroom, the walls lined with glass jars displaying a wide assortment of cannabis products in different varieties and grades. As the shop’s name implies, Sharma’s business focused on hashish. Whereas Nepalis knew about *ganja* (dried marijuana leaves and buds), *charas*—the far more psychoactively potent resin-like product derived from the green plant—was less commonly used. But foreigners wanted hashish. More than a few first learned of Nepal’s very existence from the labels on Nepali hashish packets sold on the streets of New York and other big Western cities. For them the Hippie Trail to Kathmandu was also the Drug Trail that led to the fabled “hash dens of Asia” (Pietri 2001:1). By specializing in hashish, and opening the first such shop on Freak Street, D. D. Sharma cashed-in on the huge demand that Western youth brought with them to Nepal.

According to local businesspeople, even when the cannabis trade was legal, it was seen as irreputable. With the proper licenses, buying and sell-

23. Nepalis used cannabis sparingly, mainly in conjunction with certain religious/devotional practices and as a pain reliever for elderly people (Fisher 1975).

ing within Nepal was legal—but the real money was in exporting hashish, a practice explicitly banned by the Nepal government. D. D. Sharma made no secret of flouting export laws: a prominent sign in his showroom read, “We ship ANYTHING ANYWHERE ANYTIME” (Pietri 2001:13). Looking back on the old cannabis trade, one local businessman recalled:

People who did that business came from outside. Residents from here, Newars like us, we can’t do that. People came from outside and rented places and that’s why they had courage. It was easier for them. If something went wrong they could just disappear. But for us, where would we go? We can’t just leave our property.

The hashish trade was a risky, high-stakes business but big profits made it very enticing.


By all accounts D. D. Sharma had a keen sense of how to succeed in a shady business. First of all, he had presence. “He was **huge**,” remembered one man who grew up on Freak Street. “He was so big he didn’t even look like a Nepali. We used to see him sitting in his shop, this **huge** man behind a small counter. Little place, big man. It was amazing.” Sharma also pioneered the use of English advertising, most notably in the form of popular promotional calendars featuring sentimental images of Hindu deities. Sharma printed these by the thousands, in dozens of different layouts, with an English text that read:

LET US TAKE HIGHER
EDEN HASHISH CENTRE
Oldest & Favorite Shop in Town serving you the Best Nepalese Hash and Ganja
(Available Wholesale & Retail)
COME VISIT US ANY TIME FOR ALL YOUR HASHISH NEEDS

Eden Hashish Center calendars quickly became such coveted souvenirs that a brisk secondary trade developed and even nonusers would buy pot from D. D. Sharma just to get one of his calendars. Still today these calendars are legendary and command high prices.

Sharma also knew the importance of friends in high places. Sharma’s brother-in-law described him as

very sharp in business. Very smart. He had taken everyone under his control, even the king’s uncle, a Rana. He had good links with the royals, with the police, and with the administration. And he was a master of propaganda. He opened schools as a form of social service. When there was a crisis, he’d donate salt and cooking oil. He was innovative in his business and knew how to make it grow, how to attract more tourists, and so forth.



LET US TAKE HIGHER Phone : 13863

EDEN HASHISH CENTRE

Oldest & Favourite Shop in Town Serving you the Best Nepalese Hash & Ganja
(Available Wholesale & Retail)

COME VISIT US ANY TIME FOR ALL YOUR HASHISH NEEDS

EDEN HASHISH CENTRE

OLD 5/1, Beshantpur, KATHMANDU
NEW 5/259, Ombahal, KATHMANDU

Prop. D. D. SHARMA NEPAL

14 Eden Hashish Centre advertisement.

In short order Sharma converted part of his Freak Street building into a lodge (the Inn Eden) and began looking for property to buy so he could build his own hotel. Soon he managed to buy a small plot in Ombahal, the neighborhood just south of Jhochétole, and set about trying to buy adjacent properties.

Sharma's brash ways and meteoric rise had not endeared him to his Newar neighbors who refused to sell him any more land. Undeterred, Sharma decided to build his new Eden Hotel up, not out. But in the process of digging the hotel's foundations, Sharma ended up encroaching on neighboring properties and undermining the foundations of surrounding homes. One local man remembered how Sharma "made an awful lot of money selling hashish and had good connections because money can do everything." He described how locals filed complaints against Sharma over damages to their homes. "The police came but instead of controlling Sharma they pointed at us and threatened saying not to bother Sharma anymore. Money and power—that was the link." When the relatively luxurious three-star Eden Hotel opened in 1973, it was one of the tallest buildings in Kathmandu complete with one of Nepal's first elevators.²⁴ The nine-story structure was literally a monument to D. D. Sharma's out-sized ego but it was also a virtual lightning rod for trouble that eventually drove Sharma out of Nepal.²⁵

Restaurants

Whereas almost all Freak Street hotels and lodges were run by local Nepalis, usually in their own homes or ancestral properties, restaurants were often in leased, ground-floor spaces and run by nonlocals including foreigners. Probably the first restaurant on Freak Street (following Ravi'spot) was the Hungry Eye run by a Chinese man (remembered only as Mr. Wong) married to a Tibetan woman from Darjeeling. Across the street was the Don't Pass Me By restaurant (named for a song on the 1968 Beatles *White Album*), run by two brothers, Tibetans, also from Darjeeling. Soon many other Tibetan-run businesses opened—restaurants, but also curio shops and "Buy and Sells" dealing in secondhand goods. As refugees, Tibetans were desperate to make a living and budget tourism was still a relatively undeveloped sector.

Ironically, tourism was one area where Tibetans' refugee status sometimes worked in their favor, a point often made—with some resentment—by Nepali business people:

When tourists knew that these people were Tibetan, they'd sympathize and visit their places. They loved those Tibetans! That's one reason why Tibetan shops flourished in

24. Local Newars referred to the building, tall and narrow, as "the lanky one."

25. Sharma's story resumes in chapter 10, where I discuss the politics and aftermath of the Nepal government's 1973 ban on the cannabis trade.

this area. If there were Nepali and Tibetan shops, they’d select the Tibetans because they were contributing to their cause.

Another former Freak Street-area businessman remembered, “Tourists used to support Tibetans a lot just because they were refugees. Even if we sold the same thing at the same price, they wouldn’t buy from us.” Another lodge owner was even more bitter. Using the derogatory Nepali racial term for Tibetans (which connotes being uncouth or uncivilized), he said:

These *bhotes* have earned *a lot* in this tourist business. Those tourists used to buy anything they’d sell. They’d even buy the *shit* off of Tibetans. They’d *die* for Tibetans! They thought they were all very honest and loyal. They’d pay as much money as they asked because they thought *bhotes* wouldn’t cheat them at all!

A few Tibetan businesspeople did amass fortunes through tourism²⁶ but most just got by, like the Nepalis next to them.

One of the earliest Freak Street restaurants—certainly the oldest surviving budget-tourist establishment in Kathmandu and one of the few remaining links to the glory days of Freak Street—is Ram Prasad Manandhar’s Snowman Cake Shop in Jhochétole which opened in 1969.²⁷ The Snowman started out as a juice bar. Manandhar made and bottled various kinds of fruit juice which he sold by the glass in his shop, and by the bottle, delivering up to 150 per day to locations around the city. Soon he learned how to make pies, cakes, and milkshakes, eventually hiring a cook and operating a full-fledged restaurant. Manandhar says that he never put cannabis in his baked goods but that plenty of smoking went on in his restaurant. He also allowed his guests to paint and doodle on the walls to pass the time. Looking back, Manandhar makes a distinction between tourists and hippies:

When I opened there were no **tourists**, only **hippies**. Nothing like **tourists**. They had long hair, used *charas*, smoked from a *chillum*. There were also no Nepalis [in my restaurant], only **hippies**. It was free to use hashish, and not only inside here but all along the streets, they used to line up just smoking. I mean there’d be sixty or seventy **hippies** milling around in front of this building alone. I used to keep my restaurant open till two in the morning. Now I close at 8:00.

26. For example, the owners of the Don’t Pass Me By restaurant went on to open a large and successful lodge in Thamel.

27. In an interview Manandhar guessed that he opened in about 1965 but I suspect that this is too early. He also said that when he opened, the Hungry Eye restaurant was already in operation, which would date the Snowman’s opening to around mid- to late 1969.



15 Ram Prasad Manandhar, March 2008. Photo by Mark Liechty.

Today most of the Snowman's clientele are local Nepali youth. The few foreigners who find their way to Manandhar's shop are often former hippies back in Nepal on nostalgia trips looking up what is left of their old haunts.

Some come back after thirty or forty years remembering that time. They stay at good hotels and have grown richer and older. They come here saying, "I came here way

back then." Now they stay at the Soaltee or Annapurna.²⁸ Back then they had no good clothes and just wore whatever they wanted!

One characteristic of many early restaurants was involvement by tourists themselves, commonly informal and ad hoc. I heard many variations on the theme described by one Newar businessman who, in his early twenties, around 1975, convinced his family to let him open a restaurant on the ground floor of their home near Freak Street. As a teenager he had worked in a relative's restaurant in Maruhiti and had learned English by hanging out with tourists. When he opened his own restaurant he knew how to make basic dishes but he described how his menu expanded. "People would say to me, 'Hey, do you know how to make this food?' and I'd say, 'No, can you show me how?' So they'd teach me—like how to make mashed potatoes. Back then there were days when we'd sell 100 kilos of mashed potatoes! They couldn't get enough!"

The next level of tourist involvement was actual sponsorship: Bishnu Shahi's pioneering pie shop in Pig Alley, for example, was made possible by an initial loan from foreigners. One Nepali, a former tourist guide who became a successful travel agent, told me:

If you look among these [Freak Street] shop keepers, just about everyone has backing or encouragement from a foreigner—from a tourist. Sometimes it is just, "Here is how to make a pie." But often they would become friends [and the tourist would offer a loan, saying] "Here's two hundred dollars to start a business." I would say 99 percent. This is what happened in Freak Street.

Though foreign involvement was probably more common toward the less-capital-intensive end of the business scale, 99 percent seems like an exaggeration.

Joint ventures between Nepali and foreign partners were another form of tourist involvement. One of the most famous of these was the relatively upscale Yin Yang Restaurant that occupied the ground floor of the Sugata Hotel facing Basantapur square at the north end of Freak Street. The Nepali partner was the eccentric Trilochan Shrestha, one of the earliest of a rare breed of Nepali hippies. The foreign partner was a man remembered only as "Spanish Khoury," an equally flamboyant character known for his dramatic flair. One expat remembers Spanish Khoury as being a fine horseman and owner of a magnificent horse:

28. These are two of Kathmandu's five-star luxury hotels (see chapter 4).

And you'd hear him coming—*trrrrrump, trrrrrump, trrrrrump*—at full gallop, headin' down New Road toward Jhochétole. And then he'd come flying around the corner and just in front of the Yin Yang he'd rear back on the reins and stop the horse really fast and make it slide to a stop while he jumped off. Man, he was a real Zorro type!

Opened in 1971, the Yin Yang was probably the first “themed” restaurant in Nepal with an ambiance that evoked every stereotype of a decadent Oriental pleasure den. At a time when most Kathmandu restaurants (outside of hotels) were relatively ramshackle affairs, the Yin Yang was a whole new experience. Patrons lounged against bolsters and pillows around tables on raised platforms situated around the room. Floors strewn with Oriental carpets and ceiling draped with exotic fabric created “an atmosphere of vermilion and glided gloom” (Doig 1994: 106–8). Dim lights, candles, and a thick haze of cannabis smoke completed the ambiance.²⁹ The restaurant's first chef was a Frenchman and the menu featured Chinese and European dishes: the yin and the yang.

From the start the duo catered to young tourists but also to high rollers, people like diplomats and wealthier, cosmopolitan Nepalis. Their plan evoked criticism from more budget-minded tourists. “Fuckin' shit man, what is this?” Shrestha drawled, imitating an irate hippie. “Ten rupees for a bowl of soup! Shit man.” But the concept worked. For the penny-pinchers three rupees bought a cup of tea and a plate of self-serve ganja.³⁰ Older expats living in the valley (diplomats, development aid workers, etc.) and upper-crust Nepalis normally looked at Freak Street with undisguised disgust, but the Yin Yang had the irresistible appeal of forbidden fruit. Many ventured surreptitiously into the Yin Yang, as one longtime expat remembered:

I did it, but I had to do it sneakily! I remember once, I was with [a friend], a very highly placed Rana woman, and she wanted to go to one of these hash smoking places so we went to the Yin Yang pretending to be tourists to watch the hippies. Well, to our horror, there was a distinguished elder Rana statesman sitting right there! So you could tell that people *were* intrigued by these places and this one guy was a real character anyway, sort of outrageous. I don't remember if he was smoking a chillum or not but we were all very embarrassed to be there at the same time!

29. For a photo of the Yin Yang interior circa 1972, see <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=2718919937653&set=0.154982454540999&type=1&theater> (1/25/13).

30. At that time three rupees bought you a large meal of buff steak, chips, and vegetables, with change left over, at other restaurants catering to budget tourists. At most tea shops a glass of tea went for five or ten paisa.

The Yin Yang was designed to accommodate seventy to eighty people but Shrestha remembers times when there were more than a hundred and long lines out the door.

My coresearchers and I frequently asked how the area came to be called Freak Street. Trilochan Shrestha was the only person who claimed responsibility. He described standing on a ladder hanging the Ying Yang sign-board over his new restaurant in 1971. Most Kathmandu business signs include their neighborhood’s name but, looking up and down the street at the swirling crowds of far-out characters, Shrestha decided not to write Jhochétole. “Man! This is a *freak* street!” he remembers thinking. “This ‘Freak Street’ came to me and I put it on the sign. That’s how it came that way. People just started using that name!”

Before long both foreigners and Nepalis were using the name. Few local people really understood its meaning but many independently came to their own conclusions about what Freak Street meant. One man who grew up near Jhochétole explained:

We don’t have names for streets but for chowks. I think it might have been called **Freak Street** because of all those **free, free** type tourists. It only got that name after they started coming.

Many others made the same association between “freak” and “free.” “It was **Freak Street** because **free** means *swatantra* [freedom],” said another. “Back then it was open. They could do anything they wanted.” Another person explained, “Everything then was **free** so it was **Freak Street**. And this was the name that they themselves liked.” Linguistically associating “freak” with “free” may be incorrect but Nepalis understood very well the quasi-political nature of the radically countercultural hippie lifestyle. Countless freaks came to Nepal precisely to experience freedoms they felt denied in their home countries—a fact that their Nepali hosts understood, even across the language barrier.

“Something Big and Glorious and Magnificently Insane”: Hippie Kathmandu

Kathmandu is here to change you, not for you to change it. CATHAL Ó SEARCAIGH

Why did people come to Kathmandu, and why did they so often stay? I have suggested that the Himalayas, Nepal, and Kathmandu had been so thoroughly prefigured in the Western imagination that generations came to Nepal to “discover” what they already perceived to be there. Numerous people made comments like Alderson’s who, upon entering the Kathmandu Valley, noted that “the landscape [had] a familiar *Geographical Magazine* look” (1971:167). People came to Kathmandu for the thrill of being in a place already constituted as a place of desire. Hollingshead offers some sense of the almost narcissistic delight that many felt upon reaching the fabled promised land:

Amazement was the first element of my muted delight at these bright green paddy fields between myself and the . . . distant half-charted ranges of Tibet, home of the fable-seeking imagination. The spell of the Himalayas was upon me. The beauty of my surroundings began to penetrate a hardened carapace, for these mountains had begun to exercise a magic thralldom all their own. . . . I realized . . . that I had traveled halfway across the world to find in Kathmandu what I sought in vain throughout my wanderings in the West. . . . It was a glimpse of this Other World, of something that I had seen and read about but

had never had direct experience of before. Here I could actually *feel* this something. (1973:221–22)

Arguably the “Other World” that Hollingshead and countless others found in Kathmandu was a world that they brought in their own “fable-seeking imaginations.”

But Kathmandu seemed a paradise for other more mundane reasons as well. Apparently one of Nepal’s primary attractions was that it was *not* India. “I think the best advertisement for Nepal is to go to India first. That place really makes Nepal look wonderful!” said one person. Arriving in Kathmandu from India was a welcome relief. “Katmandu’s air and temper were so different from steamy, poverty-stricken Calcutta’s. The scene was as a tapestry is to a dishrag” (Simpson 1976 [1967]:63). Similarly, in Kathmandu “cows and people looked sleek and well-fed, in comfortable contrast to the misery of Bihar” (Cunningham 1975:12). Asked if it was a shock to come to Kathmandu in 1975 a European visitor noted, “It was more of a shock to see misery, starvation in India. It was quite a relief to come to Nepal” (PAR 10/25/75). Many young travelers reported a love-hate relationship with India, a place that one American described as “that incredible, fantastic country of wonderful and terrible things” (Jacobson and Jacobson 1967:16). In India “the sensations [were] so sensational, the shocks so shocking, the excesses so excessive” (Tomory 1996:161) that by the time they arrived in Kathmandu—cool, green, and relatively uncrowded—visitors were eager to find an East that was less sensationally shocking.

Almost everyone noted that Nepalis were more laid back and less intense than Indians. “You couldn’t do things in India that here [in Nepal] people just ignored,” said one expat. “Like wearing wild clothes brought not just stares in India, but a sense of hostility. Especially for women, wearing anything vaguely form-fitting invited threats of sexual aggression or violence.” Many people reported feeling more secure than in India. In Nepal, “Western women could go trekking alone and never be bothered by anyone” (Tomory 1996:188). With Indians there was “an eagerness to please all the time, a kind of desperation to talk to you” which usually ended up with a sales pitch. Indians were much more aggressive merchants; Nepalis pretty much left you alone.

Most people arriving from India experienced this benign neglect as freedom. One expat who had arrived in the early 1970s told me:

One of the attractions was the tolerance of the people because you could be *whatever the hell* you wanted to be. It was that simple. Where else could you do this? India?

Maybe you could get away with it in an ashram, but not on the streets. But this country was *incredibly* unspoiled, tolerant, nonviolent, nonthreatening, kind. So if you wanted to schlep around here and jangle some bangles or beads, fine. I mean, like, people used to walk around here in—you name it: frilly dresses, crowns. [One woman] always looked like she was going to her confirmation!

When I asked why she thought Nepalis were so tolerant she described how, from a foreigner's perspective, Nepalis were a contented people, living a seemingly timeless way of life. They were so wrapped up in a perpetual round of religious observances that they seemed to hardly notice foreigners. For her, the Nepali attitude seemed to be, "We live with God. Why don't you come and live with God with us?"

No doubt a big part of this perceived freedom was Nepal's lax attitude toward drug use. Because the "psychedelic experience" was a key part of Western youth counterculture, many took the systematic criminalization of that experience at home to be a direct assault on their personal freedom. "President Nixon was a right-wing nutcase and everyone we knew was getting busted," said Jerry Beisler who left the US "for political exile" in Nepal in the early 1970s (2006:218). With the US becoming more "totalitarian, repressive, [and] brutal" Beisler and his pot-smoking friends decided "it was time to find freedom somewhere else on earth" (2006:225, 223). For a sizable minority with less noble ideals, cheap and legal cannabis was the freedom they really cared about. Moreover, in Kathmandu the police (intensely reviled in the West) seemed largely absent. "Nobody knew what a Nepali policeman looked like," said one person. Kathmandu (like Goa) was "like Haight-Ashbury without the fuzz" (Tomory 1996:186, 138).

The city's pleasures went beyond pot: because of Nepal's relatively open import policies, tourists found familiar goods in Kathmandu that weren't available in India. "I found that *everything* in India was made in India," said one traveler. "India was love it or leave it" (Tomory 1996:160). By contrast, in Kathmandu you could get Nescafé, American and English cigarettes, canned goods, and Japanese electronics—not to mention pie, mashed potatoes, cheese, and buff steak. And while India had strict regulations (and heavy taxes) on alcohol, in Nepal it was easy to get local or imported booze. Even before arriving one traveler had heard of foreigners in Kathmandu who had assembled "a kind of pleasure realm, with fruit juicers, hot showers, and even a refrigerator chock full of yoghurt, honey, and butter. Kathmandu was a feast" (Tomory 1996:97).

Added to these delights was the fact that, in the wake of the Chinese invasion (and closure) of Tibet, Nepal had become "a kind of tourist-Tibet

for Westerners” (Simpson 1976 [1967]:4). With “fabled” Tibet just beyond the mountains to the north, and many refugees settled in the valley, Kathmandu was the closest one could get to Tibetan people and Tibetan Buddhism which, by the early 1970s, was capturing the popular Western imagination.¹

Finally, part of Kathmandu’s appeal was simply that it was the end of the line, as far away as a Western traveler could get, geographically and culturally. Rolling into Kathmandu in 1972 Terry Tarnoff reflected:

Yes, I’d done it, I’d gotten as far away from Milwaukee as I could go, and you know what? I like it. A lot! . . . I thought about how many people had started off on this same journey, and how few had made it this far. I thought about how, of all the possible destinations, this was the farthest outpost, the most remote spot of all. Kathmandu was the end of the road. (2005:304, 306)

Having come so far, having gone through so much, and having found such a hospitable spot, many stayed on forming a vibrant and diverse Western youth “scene.” Kathmandu was as far out as it was far away.

“The Most Extraordinary Group of People”: The Kathmandu Scene

The socially unconventional like to travel, the Lost Generation to Paris in the twenties, the Beat Generation to Tangier in the fifties; and then in the sixties, the Love Generation to San Francisco, to Amsterdam, and at the end of the Road, to Kathmandu. (in Tomory 1996:99)

Kathmandu’s budget/hippie/traveler scene was a perpetually flowing stream with some getting caught in its eddies—for months and even years. It swelled with young arrivals throughout the 1970s but also waxed and waned seasonally as people left in winter for the beaches of Goa and arrived or returned (often many times) during the beautiful spring and autumn peak seasons.

Although Kathmandu’s “scene” was unique, it was, in fact, a continuation of the same countercultural scene that existed in San Francisco, New York City’s Greenwich Village, London’s Soho, Amsterdam, and countless other nodes in what had become a global youth counterculture circuit. Kathmandu was simply its most distant, exotic, and (to many) desired outpost. To New Yorker Jeremy Bernstein, the Western youth clientele he

1. Chapter 12 examines the growth of “dharma tourism” in the mid- to late 1970s.

observed in Kathmandu restaurants looked “as if it might have been transported bodily from the Village” (1970:71). Jivan Shrestha, who grew up on Freak Street, explained:

I’ll tell you, in those days things were happening in Kathmandu in *very much* the same manner as they were happening anywhere else, in any major city of the world. But here with *even more* liberty because they [young travelers] were away from their home environment, with access to free dope. I mean, what more could you want?

Already by the early 1970s Kathmandu was beginning to look like a sanctuary for a way of life that had perhaps peaked in 1968 and was on the decline back home. Kathmandu was a magnet for people fleeing the West who hoped to recreate or preserve a counterculture that was under attack. From old beatniks, to members of Timothy Leary’s Millbrook LSD commune, to former “Merry Pranksters,” to remnants of New York City’s radical underground, the Kathmandu scene began to take on the feel of a refugee camp for victims of the growing culture wars back home.

One notable countercultural infusion came in spring of 1971 when several psychedelically decorated buses from the fabled Hog Farm Commune in California pulled into Kathmandu and disgorged the likes of Wavy Gravy (a.k.a. Hugh Romney) famous for acting as a kind of MC for the Woodstock Music Festival.² “Those guys got off the bus looking like total freaks,” recalled one person. Another remembered how dozens of Hog Farmers “infus[ed] the scene with a whiz-bang but weary energy” (Beisler 2006:35). Not all the Hog Farmers stayed on but many did—some for years. They, along with many other veterans of iconic 1960s events and movements, only added to Kathmandu’s amazing gravitational pull. For many, just being part of this scene was the stuff of dreams. “I’m actually here,” wrote Terry Tarnoff,

surrounded by the most extraordinary group of people, yes, I’m actually here . . . and I’m looking into the eyes of the people around me and I’m feeling part of something big and glorious and magnificently insane. (2005:336)

2. The Hog Farm was one of California’s original hippie communes, started by Wavy Gravy, himself a graduate of Ken Kesey’s Merry Pranksters (Wolfe 1968). In 1969 the Hog Farm was hired to help manage logistics and services at the Woodstock Music Festival (Beisler 2006:236). Motivated by the humanitarian crisis in (then) East Pakistan, the Hog Farmers bought buses in Europe and headed overland to South Asia. With the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971 making their original destination impossible, the Hog Farmers turned left and headed for Kathmandu where their vehicles straggled in around late March 1971 (cf. <https://soundcloud.com/sloowtapes/john-chick>, 11/7/15).

The Kathmandu scene included all kinds of people: from the occasional celebrity (Richard Alpert, Cat Stevens, Lawrence Ferlinghetti), to “VIP hippies” (such as the daughters of political elites Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Moshe Dyan), and “rich hippies”—children of the Western corporate elite living on trust funds that often supported entire groups of friends. There were Vietnam War veterans and draft resisters, Hindu and Buddhist practitioners, students of Nepali arts, and scholars. Notably, almost all were born into the Western (or East Asian) middle classes and enjoyed the privilege, resources, and security that allowed them to leave home and experiment with different ways of being. One Nepali remembered foreigners saying, “I don’t have a job or anything. I’ll worry about that later.”

Although some hippies were big spenders, most carefully budgeted their money to make it last as long as possible. For some the preoccupation with money became so excessive that they could do little more than swap poverty stories and engage others in games of “one-downmanship.” One visitor remembered being

so offended by the fact that all these travelers would talk about was how they managed to save a dollar doing this or doing that. And that was it. It was a fixation on money. Claiming to be poor they were more ensnared by money than anybody!

Then again, for many their poverty eventually felt very real, having lost or run out of money. Usually a friend or relative bailed them out, but in extreme cases, such as those involving drug addictions, foreigners ended up selling everything they owned (including passports) and were reduced to begging. The lucky ones got help from their embassies or from charitable organizations but some actually died on the streets.

How did people spend their time? Upon arrival most focused on eating and relaxing: the good food and low-pressure environment offered temporary relief from the intensely foreign experience of Asia. After working through a few pies and cakes, a few plates of Chinese noodles, a few gallons of fruit juice, and a few fingers of hashish, some set off to see the sites around the valley, or maybe caught a jeep to the valley rim to see the Himalayan panorama. Some rented bicycles for a few rupees a day,³ but with plenty of time on their hands, most just walked. “You *had to* walk,” said one. “The public transportation system practically didn’t exist in those days.” Even the most dazed potheads managed to meander over to the Central Post Office or American Express office to check the *poste restante*,

3. A former bicycle shop owner described how “after about v.s. 2028 [1971] business was great. I had forty-six cycles on hire. A new cycle cost five rupees for a day, or three rupees for an old one. I could earn 150 rupees by noon! Amazing! And then rice was cheap.”

DON'T EAT ANY GREENS. BOIL WATER FOR TWENTY MINUTES.
 —NOTICE IN THE AMERICAN LIBRARY, LATE 1960S (STABLEIN 1985: 63).

or down New Road to check out the propaganda at the Chinese bookstore or American library.

Many found the city itself a source of entertainment. With local life swirling around them, there was always something happening. One person explained:

What was so wonderful was that there were always festivals on, or there was always a funeral, or a wedding. And so the town just rang with these crazy bands—the music, the crowds: you could just join in. You could be there, watching, up close. Sometimes I'd go down to the river and watch the cremations. They didn't seem to mind. There was this kind of extraordinary openness on their part. You could just be a part of the city.

At night many were attracted by the sound of elderly Newar *bhajan* (devotional song) singers who gathered regularly in temples on Durbar Square.

You'd go past that old temple where they play music at night [the Kastabmandap on Durbar Square] and there'd be three or four Westerners with long hair in there sort of joining in with the locals. It was very typical and quite wonderful. They'd be playing cymbals or some easy thing and they'd just sit there absorbed in the color and noise of it.

Others read. One Nepali merchant who ran a book shop on Freak Street in the 1970s held out his hands as far apart as his shoulders and said:

These hippies used to come into my shop and buy this much of books! They were smoking hashish all day and had real trouble with sleep. So, all night they used to . . . [flips page after page of an imaginary book]. They really went for science fiction—they'd smoke and read science fiction. Then after one week they come back, I give them back half their money, and again they take [still more books]!

And some shopped. By the late 1960s there was already a well-developed tourist shopping trade. Between the Basantapur curio dealers and the merchants in the old Indrawhowk bazaar, Kathmandu was fast becoming the budget shopper's paradise that it was later known as. Marilyn Stablein listed "knickknacks for sale in the bazaar" around 1970:

Brass candle-holders, hash pipes carved from soapstone, bronze Buddhas in any size or shape: two-armed, four-armed, sixteen-armed; yak amulets to protect the animals from catastrophe . . . charms to prevent scorpion bites, bone prayer beads, human thighbones made into trumpets and bowls carved from human skulls [for Tibetan Buddhist rites]; incense twigs, woodblock prints on rice paper, Gurkha knives . . . yak-hair woven blankets, and Tibetan saddle carpets. (1985:64)

From my boy’s-eye view in 1969 I was especially taken with the stuffed toy yaks and colorful yak-wool jackets hung from second story windows over the narrow Indrachowk market street. Then, as now, most tourist goods were Tibet-related, suggesting that Nepali merchants had already figured out that, for tourists, Nepal was a surrogate Tibet.

With their cannabis consumed and munchies satisfied, most young tourists were happy to hang out and watch the world go by. Nepalis remember foreigners spending hours by the Bishnumati River that (difficult as it is to believe now) then flowed full and clear between the old city and Swayambhu. But Durbar Square temples were the most popular spots for hanging out—their wide, tiered steps the perfect place to sit above the milling streams of Nepalis going about their business. Many Nepalis remember hippies sitting on the temple steps strumming guitars and smoking. For local children these immobilized hippies were a source of entertainment and, for the braver ones, targets for English practice. More than a few asked to try out a guitar and some foreigners actually taught them. By the early 1970s groups of foreign and Nepali youth held impromptu jam sessions on the temple steps.

Continuing a practice that emerged on the overland route to Nepal, people in the Kathmandu scene often went by nicknames that included some identifying attribute. Tent Tom was a former Hog Farmer who married a Tibetan woman and set up a business with refugees making tents. Motorcycle Mark repaired motorcycles for the Peace Corps and others. Peanut Butter Harry introduced a certain American product to Nepal. Suitcase Bob specialized in hashish smuggling using false-bottomed suitcases. There was Bad Ad, English Andy, Will the Thrill, Ted the Hun, Mushroom John, Printshop James, Sweet and Sour Sue, Sunshine James, Irish Patrick, Captain David, Acid Paul, Australian Rosie, and on and on. In fact nicknames may have helped maintain a certain anonymity given that a few of their bearers had criminal backgrounds; others were US draft evaders, and virtually all eventually faced problems with expired visas.

As in other parts of the world, the Kathmandu youth scene also had its sense of fashion. Some chose versions of Hindu or Buddhist religious garb, favoring saffron or maroon respectively. Some looked like they had

wandered off the set of a costume drama: Viking Brut was an enormous Norwegian hippie who strutted around in a horned Viking helmet, beating his chest, and chugging beer. Many went for what one described as “the gypsy look”—an amalgam of exotic items:

You know, colorful shirts from Afghanistan or someplace that they’d been, or something picked up in India, or a hat from the Swat Valley, or something from Istanbul, or an Afghani vest, or a *kurta* from Goa or Lucknow. Then there was the Tibetan Look: people would wear *chubbas*⁴ and cowboy hats.

I mean, they were sort of like costumes. We all had our costumes and *we were that*. That was *your thing*. You just wore it every day. . . . You know, it was sort of colorful, sort of a carry-over of that psychedelic thing, like, *swash of color*, man! I used to braid my hair up and wear a chubba. I still have my chubba somewhere.

The description of clothing as a “costume” that one *actually became* is significant. Clothing is perhaps always a kind of costume signifying identity. But in Kathmandu, people felt free to throw caution to the wind. For some, sartorial freedom and identity play were among Kathmandu’s greatest pleasures. One perceptive Nepali told me that his memories of hippies were of “walking theater: their bodies were like a stage in themselves.”

But hippie fashion was not just a benign curiosity. Even when attempting to “go native” foreigners risked offending local sensibilities. Growing up among hippies in Bombay, Kirin Narayan probably responded like many other South Asians when she

stared, aghast, at the *cholis*⁵ and petticoats minus saris; embroidered vests minus shirts; macramé tops minus bras; sheer skirts minus slips; cotton pajama bottoms minus decent crotch-covering *kurtas*, drawstrings dangling obscenely outward. (2007:125)

Intentionally or otherwise, hippie fashions often crossed the border of propriety into sexual suggestiveness and even indecency, especially by Asian standards. At least initially, most Western women wore long skirts as a gesture of cultural respect. But by the mid-1970s, as more people flew direct to Nepal (without the tempering experience of *The Road*), Western “mod” fashions, including miniskirts, became more common—“to the

4. A long-sleeved robe worn by Tibetan men.

5. Cholis are the (usually) midriff-baring blouses worn under saris by South Asian women.

displeasure of Nepalis,” explained one person. One of the more amazing stories I heard came from a British woman who, in 1975, walked from Nagarkot to Changu Narayan in the eastern part of the Kathmandu Valley:

So I’m walking along through the fields on this beautiful day and here, in front of me, are two foreign women in bikinis! And of course on every side the Nepalis are staring goggle-eyed. Later I caught up with them near Changu and suggested they might want to put on more clothes so as not to offend the locals. They just sniffed and said, “What they think is their problem, not ours.” Anywhere else in South or West Asia those two would have been raped.

Although such cultural insensitivity was hardly representative of the Kathmandu scene, these women nevertheless convey an extreme version of a mentality that *was* prevalent: *Don’t bother us and we won’t bother you. If you don’t like what you see—tough.*

For many foreigners, the Kathmandu scene was just a continuation of youth counterculture scenes around the world. Being in Nepal made it more interesting and, perhaps, a bit freer, but didn’t demand any particular concessions to local cultural norms. For each of the scores of young visitors who moved out from the scene to become genuinely invested in Nepali culture, history, and friendships, there were *many* scores more who turned their backs on Nepal. “By the time most of those hippies got here,” recalled one expat, “they were so into their own world that cross-cultural interaction and understanding wasn’t high on their agenda.” A few voiced concern about the political repression, trade union suppression, and political propaganda in Nepal (Marnham 1971:242–45), but most took their foreign status as license for indifference. One person who came to Nepal in the early 1970s explained to me:

As a foreigner you’re not responsible for *that* [back home] or for *this* [here in Nepal]. I can’t affect this. I can only go with the flow. I think for many of us, at least for those of us who were politically involved [back home], it was a big relief to lose that burden because I already *knew* I couldn’t change *that*.

My point is simply to illustrate how easily the Kathmandu scene could become an inward-looking community of self-styled exiles pursuing their own agendas. As Terry Tarnoff put it, after having lived in Kathmandu for a year, “Travel has nothing to do with time and, in fact, not much to do with place. Travel is about discovering something within” (2005:284–85). With due respect to Tarnoff’s (and others’) quest for self-discovery, it’s

hard not to hear echoes of Ó Searcaigh's claim (this chapter's epigraph) that the reason for Kathmandu's existence is to "change you." Often, the Kathmandu hippie scene treated Nepal as simply another stage for its own personal dramas.

"Living in Nepal": Staying On

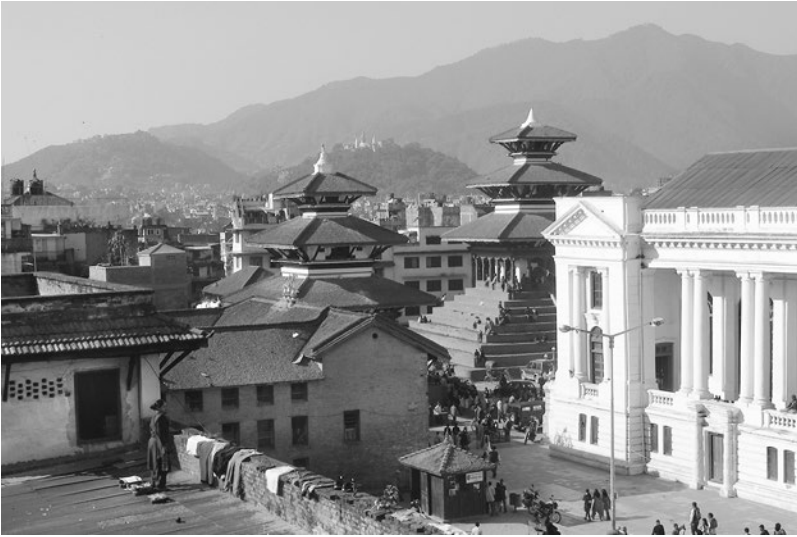
Of the tens of thousands of young people flowing into the Kathmandu Valley every year by the early 1970s, some people "stuck." "I mean, there were a lot of stoned hippies that were passing through," said one long-term expat.

But people who *stuck* got stuck because it was a tolerant place. You could pretty much be anybody or anything you wanted. The people here were very tolerant. They put up with tons of crap.

Getting "stuck" usually began with leaving Freak Street for some even cheaper privately rented space. For some this meant knocking on local doors, pointing to a corner of the ground-floor storeroom, and holding out some money. My coworkers and I spoke with several people who grew up with hippies living down below, something shocking to Nepali sensibilities given that ground-floor spaces were considered inauspicious and polluting (not to mention dirty and damp). Foreigners tended to be friendly but rarely seen, coming in late at night and spending their days outside. People who drove in overland often camped in their vehicles on public land near Swayambhu or even, to the horror of Nepalis, on the cremation grounds near the Bishnumanti River—one of the most inauspicious, haunted places imaginable!

Other foreigners soon found a place in one of the dozens or even hundreds of houses rented by Nepalis to constantly revolving groups of foreigners. For one hundred to three hundred rupees per month (about ten to thirty dollars at official rates, less on the black market) foreigners could rent an old farmhouse near Swayambhu or Bodhanath. With enough people splitting the bill, rent costs were negligible. Most of these houses lacked toilets or running water. For water and bathing one visited the neighborhood tap, or splurged back in town on a two-rupee hot shower at a lodge (Raj 1973:22).

"What did people *do* for all those months and years?" I asked one person who had spent most of the 1970s in a house near Swayambhu. "We used to call it *living*," she said.



16 View of Swayambhu from Freak Street, October 2007. Photo by Mark Liechty.

We used to say “I lived in Afghanistan,” or “I lived in Nepal.” And all that meant was that you set up your little kerosene stove, and you hung up your drop cloths, and you lived there. You know, you went to the bazaar to buy food, and you cleaned your rice, and you chopped your vegetables, and you cooked your chapattis, and you smoked a million chillums and joints a day.

But beyond the day to day routine, “People pursued *interests*,” she explained. “People were on *paths*.”

Like, you were someone who wrote songs, and you were someone who kept wonderful journals, you played guitar, and you were a poet. Some people had galleries. And there were artists and there were people learning Newari. . . . Definitely people had businesses. There were people dealing in stolen art—lots of people. Actually, you didn’t ask people a lot about what they did. In fact, you still don’t. And then there were people who had their own money—they were rich people. Like [one couple]: she was an astrologer and did charts and he was into Buddhist culture. A lot of people were into [religious] practice. A lot of people studied Hinduism or Buddhism, or became sadhus. Some were opium addicts. Some were dope smugglers. And there was a lot of hanging out—great hanging out going on all over the place!

“We didn’t think of ourselves as tourists,” she concluded. “We were *living* here.”

Herman Hagaraar's "HIPPIY" Post-Cards will tell them what's going on!
And they're the cheapest yet. Only 15 paisa each. Send a bunch.

—ADVERTISEMENT IN *THE RISING NEPAL*, MARCH 22, 1969.

Aside from the lucky “trust fund hippies” who lived long-term off of assets at home, most people who stayed eventually had to earn some money. Making money in Kathmandu wasn't easy. “But,” one person explained, “you didn't need much money. It was pretty cheap.” One American couple lived for years on fifty dollars a month.

Moneymaking schemes ranged from simple to elaborate and from perfectly legal, to questionable, to illegal. Temporary jobs included working as a hairdresser at a fancy hotel, writing articles for local English-language newspapers, waitressing at restaurants serving foreigners, and teaching English or other Western languages to Nepalis.

Some people started their own small businesses. One expat remembered an American who “ran a little restaurant down in Kimdol [near Swayambhu].”

Every day she and her husband, who had a guru—a Sikh guru and they had two little wild half-naked children—and they rented a little tea shop and every day she had a fixed menu. Every day they'd spend the morning shopping and cutting vegetables and would serve lunch and people would come and hang out.

Others started export businesses, usually shipping Tibetan carpets to Europe and North America. A few started rug factories to provide employment for destitute Tibetan refugees, helping to design products and market them abroad.

For foreigners anything approximating a genuine business required a Nepali partner. One person explained that “for Nepalis it was easy. They'd just register it, and we were the silent partners, always the silent partners. You had to have a Nepali front person.” Sometimes Nepali partners were active in running the business, as with Trilochan Shrestha (whose partner was “Spanish Khoury”) at the Yin Yang Restaurant on Freak Street. Sometimes the Westerner was *married* to the Nepali partner, like the couple who ran the Rag Bag clothing shop near Ratna Park in the late 1960s. Other times the Nepali partner was out of the picture. One Freak Street merchant told me about “a Dutch guy” who, with a Nepali friend, rented ground-floor space from him in 1971:

Boiled and filtered, of course, and “Baked with Love”

UNITY RESTAURANT

Under American management, Nepalese, Western, and Chinese dishes.

Home baked pastry anyone can afford. 7:30 AM–10 PM. Off New Road, across from American Library.

—ADVERTISEMENT IN *THE RISING NEPAL*, AUGUST 20, 1972, P. 4.

He just wanted to *be* here. He was just hanging on, you know. He came and rented space from us and started a juice shop. He used to go to the market every day, buy lemons, oranges, whatever, make juice and sell it. He got some tables and chairs to put in there. And on the walls, he just plastered, like a collage, all these Nepali paper prints. And he had a tin full of brushes, with water colors. So, whoever came to have fruit juice can also paint as much as they like. I mean that whole place was literally painted by tourists!

This same Nepali merchant explained that foreign-run businesses were often short-lived:

A lot of things opened overnight, ran for some time, and then the guy decided he'd had fun. He left. Then somebody else came and opened, in the same place with another name, completely different from what went before. That's how it went. I mean these were tiny [businesses]. They weren't out to get rich. They did it for daily expenses, just make a little money.

Freak Street's “backbone businesses” were Nepali owned and initiated, he explained. “These other people didn't have much impact economically.”

Yet some foreign-partnered businesses did last long enough to become hippie/expat institutions. The Rose Mushroom on Freak Street, run by American “Mushroom” John Chick, was probably the first nightclub in Nepal, its business motto: The Dope Trail Ends Here! “It had a mirrored dance floor, the newest sounds from the West and the best smoke” (Pietri 2001:23). Another person told me:

Sure it was a disco, you know, hash provided, hookah pipes on the tables. Of course it was all legal. And you know, a lot of [Nepali] government types would come in, a lot of royal family people—to drink but also to hang around the Western babes who were waitressing.

The PRINT SHOP and GALLERY: The biggest and finest wood block collection in Kathmandu. Over 400 different prints available on handmade Nepali Rice or Sikkimese Silk paper, each with commentary. Open 10:30–6:30, Sunday–Friday. 5/250 Jhochhen Tole, Freak Street.

—ADVERTISEMENT IN *THE RISING NEPAL*, FEBRUARY 20, 1977, P. 8.

Soon dubbed the “Nose Rushroom” for its intoxicating clouds of smoke, the business inspired many imitations often operated by Nepalis or Tibetans serving a mainly local clientele. But the combination of too much alcohol, too many young men, and too few women usually spelled trouble. Few of these businesses made it through the 1970s.

One of the longest-lived foreign-run businesses was the Print Shop established on Freak Street by American James Giambrone in 1972. In previous years Simon White, Ian Alsop, and others had commissioned Newar and Tibetan refugee craftsmen to carve woodblock reproductions of famous Buddhist devotional images. Printed individually or on items like lampshades or calendars, these intricate black-and-white block prints became popular decor elements and souvenirs. By the time Giambrone arrived in 1971 there were already several Westerners producing woodblock prints on rice paper. They hired people like Giambrone to walk the streets hawking prints for a 10 percent commission.

There were about nine people selling at any one time and often we would find ourselves at the same tea shop. These were the lively hippie, traveler, and local gathering places of the day—The Cabin, Camp Hotel, Tibetan Brothers, Vishnu’s Pie ‘n Chai [*sic*] in Pig Alley. . . . It was tough dealing with the hashish-smoking, tea-spilling tourists who could easily burn and stain more prints than I could sell in a day. (Giambrone 2003)

“I had everyone’s prints and would sell them and sell them,” Giambrone told me. But it was hard work and eventually he decided, “Hey, I’m going to open up a shop and have *them come to me!* So that’s when I opened the Print Shop and Art Gallery in ’72 in Jhochétole.” Printshop James (Giambrone) ran the business until 1974 when he handed it over to Printshop Chris (Kolish) who nurtured it until 1980, the year Giambrone returned to Kathmandu where he has been, pretty much, ever since.⁶

6. Giambrone’s Print Shop evolved into today’s Indigo Gallery, which he still directs, in Kathmandu’s Naxal neighborhood.

From making block prints it was only a small step to printing other material—from broadsides to books—written by the scene’s small but growing literary community. Around 1974 a group of these poets, including Angus MacLise, Ira Cohen, John Chick, and others established the Spirit Catcher bookstore in a prime location near Freak Street. Spirit Catcher was a used bookstore specializing in works on religion, music, art, and poetry. But it also sold beautifully produced limited edition poetry collections by resident hippie artists—to whom I will return in more detail below.

Aunt Jane’s Restaurant was another well-known foreign-run business in the Freak Street area, a spot popular with hippies, travelers, Peace Corps volunteers, adventurous Nepalis, and even diplomatic and development personnel. Married to a former Nepal Peace Corps director, “Aunt Jane” Martin stayed on and began several small businesses teaming up with Nepalis from disadvantaged backgrounds and then turning operations over to them. The chef and official owner of Aunt Jane’s was a Newar untouchable who, having worked for Americans for years, was an accomplished cook.

One of Aunt Jane’s priorities, and a key to her restaurant’s appeal, was food safety. At a time when eating raw vegetables in Nepal was almost guaranteed to cause diarrhea or worse, Aunt Jane’s offered fresh tossed salads from ingredients carefully disinfected in iodine water. Even with dressing, the salads tasted vaguely like a doctor’s office, but it was a small price to pay for what was probably the only safe green salad available commercially on the subcontinent at the time. I remember the bliss of a meal at Aunt Jane’s in the late 1970s that featured a buff burger, salad, and pie. Aunt Jane herself came to a sad and untimely end. A devout Christian Scientist, she had been in seemingly excellent health before being found dead in her bed one morning in the fall of 1973 (at the age of forty-three). Though rumors circulated, there were no signs of foul play and she was cremated (at Pashu-patinath) without an autopsy (McHugh 2001:6–8). The restaurant lived on long after her death, a testimony to her compassion and vision.

In addition to the many above-board means of earning money in Nepal, some foreigners developed schemes that skirted the edges of legality. Some took to a high-flying life of (basically) smuggling, learning how to take advantage of profit margins created by import restrictions. Some enterprising young foreigners brought suitcases full of Japanese wrist-watches from Bangkok to Nepal where they sold for double the price. With gold prices in India artificially high because of import restrictions, foreigners could bring gold from Hong Kong to Nepal, smuggle it across the porous Indian border, and make good profits. Similarly, because Thai-

land banned gemstone imports from India, gems bought in India could be flown to Bangkok via Kathmandu, generating big profits. Jerry Beisler, a seasoned smuggler, noted that the trick was to “always look sharp.” Short hair and a crisp white linen business suit were enough to clear customs (2006:177–80).

Further into the realms of illegality were the dealers in Asian antiques. Though Nepal banned the export of Nepali antiquities, the influx of precious objects brought by fleeing Tibetan refugees were, theoretically, free from export prohibitions. The problem was determining an object’s provenance. Some dealers adhered to the laws but many succumbed to the temptation of passing off Nepali goods as Tibetan. Others abandoned all pretenses, brazenly trading in stolen Nepali antiquities, some literally pried out of temples. Some smugglers had showrooms in places like Bangkok where they could legally sell stolen objects. A few made careers out of Asian antiques but for most smuggling was a side-line enterprise—a statuette here, a *thanka* there—to help make ends meet. By the early 1970s Nepalis were accusing foreigners of pillaging the nation’s cultural heritage. They were right, but less frequently acknowledged were Nepali co-conspirators, not to mention the royal family itself, widely reputed to have been among the most inveterate smugglers of all.

Another quasi-legal, though far less nefarious, hippie enterprise was the Humpayetti Trekking Company, a business whose services were as unusual and irreverent as its name. Unlike many of their more insular compatriots, Americans Big Red Ted (Worcester) and Bad Ad (Addison Smith) fell in love with Himalayan people and culture. They became trekking enthusiasts, exploring many of the remote, out-of-the-way, and in some cases officially out-of-bounds areas along Nepal’s northern frontier. Both Worcester (who had initially come to Nepal as an anthropology PhD student to study Tibetan culture) and Smith were soon proficient in various Himalayan languages and familiar with backcountry trails. By the early 1970s they had become popular informal trekking guides and around 1973 decided to turn their passion into something more like a business.

Although never officially registered, Humpayetti Treks had its own supply of gear for clients and even an enticing illustrated brochure that asked, “How about some adventure? . . . Lace up your hiking boots and walk up to an entirely different world populated by Tibetans and Sherpas” (in Beisler 2006:124–5). One person remembered Humpayetti as “an informal, word-of-mouth trekking service for cool people who wanted to go to cool places—meaning, places that were officially closed to foreigners, or that required expensive special permission to visit [legally].” When con-

fronted by authorities, Worcester and Smith were masters of sweet talk, the greased palm, and, when needed, the tall tale. In one famous instance they took a group to Kirong in Tibet, an area strictly off-limits to foreigners and a trip unthinkable for other trekking services. Using little-known trails they walked around check posts and into the restricted border zone. At the Tibetan frontier they convinced border guards that they had actually *come from* Tibet. Thinking they were sending the party back, the guards sent them on their way into Tibetan territory. They pulled off the reverse on the way home, convincing Nepali border officials to “send them back” to Nepal. The Humpayetti Trekking Company operated for more than two decades, managed to attract some high-profile celebrity clients, and helped make its proprietors some of the longest-term members of the Kathmandu countercultural expat scene.

The Drug Trade

In the early 1970s a kilo of Nepali hashish—considered the finest in the world by aficionados—cost about ten US dollars in Nepal. In New York City the same product sold for around two thousand dollars, in Canada still more, and in Australia almost four thousand dollars (Pietri 2001:7). Given that anyone who managed to get Nepali hashish to one of these other places stood to make vast profits, it’s not surprising that many succumbed to the temptation in spite of the risks involved. Drug-running may have been illegal but for many its morality was anything but black-and-white. Many considered cannabis use a right unfairly denied by most Western governments. For them, hashish smuggling was an act of defiance, made all the sweeter by profit. Dope was legal in Nepal and in Amsterdam. The challenge was getting from one safe haven to the other through intermediary countries where possession meant a one-way ticket to jail.

Dutch Bob was a well-known hashish entrepreneur always on the lookout for couriers willing to transport hashish from Kathmandu to Amsterdam. He had an elaborate network of paid (off) customs agents on both ends but needed individual travelers to transport hashish on flights to Europe (Beisler 2006:41–42). The risks were great but so were the potential profits, including for the courier. According to Beisler (2006:40), Dutch Bob tried to persuade reluctant couriers by arguing that it was one’s moral duty to aid poor struggling countries like Holland and Nepal, and to help Amsterdam lead the way “to freedom and legalization.”

Along with a few big players, thousands of others took part in hash

smuggling on a much smaller scale. One common, relatively safe scheme mailed a few grams of hashish—ironed paper-thin between layers of cardstock—to Western subscribers on a regular basis. One person I interviewed described taking over a mailing scheme from an American draft resistor returning home on amnesty after living in Asia for several years:

He said he only made a few hundred dollars a month but here that worked just fine. . . . I did this for several years until one day the guy at the post office here [in Kathmandu] picked up one of my [pay] envelopes, slapped it on his hand, and said, “Who gets this one? You or me?” So I asked, “What if I get it?” He said, “You get it with the police.” And I asked, “What if you get it?” and he said, “I just put it in my pocket.” I said, “It’s yours!” and never did it again.

More risky, but more profitable, was the prospect of taking larger amounts of hashish home with you. False bottoms became the rage: false-bottom Volkswagens, false-bottom suitcases, false-bottom candles. Initially people went overland to Europe. But by the early 1970s Iran and Turkey were cracking down on drug-runners, often with harsh penalties. One person I interviewed described the Afghanistan/Iran border in 1973:

These cars were coming across from Herat and if people looked like hippies . . . they would just completely search the car. There was a French group in a Peugeot, a sedan, there were four of them. And apparently the guards found some, some drugs on their person, so they started inspecting the car. They put this car up on a ramp and they *literally* took that car apart: wheels off, fenders off, all the inside off, facings off all the doors. . . . All looking for a little bit of marijuana.

Soon the Iranian customs post at Taybad boasted a brand-new (American-funded) facility complete with a museum of failed smuggling scams consisting of “a corridor of glass-fronted cabinets, each exhibit—‘hollow shoes seized from Swedish National’—neatly labeled, the endless [jail] sentence underlined” (Tomory 1996:36).

Faced with these prospects, most smugglers soon opted to fly. Initially it was fairly easy to conceal hash in suitcases. Marnham (1971:240) describes a couple who funded their Kathmandu lifestyle in the late 1960s by having the woman periodically “clean up” (shed all traces of hippie-ness) and fly home to family in Connecticut—with a suitcase of hashish. Returning with a suitcase of cash, they lived comfortably for another year before repeating the process. But by the early 1970s anyone with a Nepal visa in their passport was targeted for drug inspections, whether long-haired hippies or not. Serious smugglers began using two passports: one to get in and

out of Nepal, another “clean” passport for travel to a drug-free destination from which to enter the US or Canada (Pietri 2001:40).

Another scam involved shipping hashish, via international air or surface freight, disguised as some other product. This was the method favored by Joseph Pietri, a swaggering American pothead whose 2001 memoir is modestly entitled *The King of Nepal: High Adventure Hashish Smuggling through the Kingdom of Nepal*. Pietri’s book is full of stories seemingly too outrageous to be true yet many are at least based in fact, and a few I’ve been able to confirm. Pietri started out as a small-time drug dealer in New York City, buying and reselling drugs from suburban college kids who brought them back from Europe, the Middle East, and Asia (2001:3). He was especially impressed with the earning potential of Nepali hash:

Anyone who has smoked Nepalese hash will never forget their first time. I remember mine—the rush was so strong that I had to sit on the floor and hold on. What a taste! Stuff like that sold itself. . . . Rather, it flew out of my right pocket and filled my left pocket with loot. Selling Nepalese hash was, and will always be, a blessing. (2001:4)

By the early 1970s Pietri decided to go straight to the source and make some real money.

He quickly learned the ropes in Kathmandu and forged key alliances with (corrupt) Nepali officials. A wholesaler’s license cost about one hundred US dollars a year and allowed him to legally buy and hold any amount of hashish. License in hand, Pietri would

rent a helicopter and fly to . . . the [far western] Humla Jumla district. There I would buy out the area’s complete production of Spaghetti Finger Hash, fly it back to Kathmandu, declare it at Customs and pay the 35 rupee (US\$3.50) per kilo tax. . . . Nepal was beautiful. (2001:13)

The challenge was getting the hashish *out* of Nepal and *into* Western markets.

Pietri’s trick was to hide hashish in otherwise legitimate freight shipments. He became a dealer in exotic Asian animals, shipping all kinds of rare creatures in elaborate crates whose walls contained large amounts of densely pressed hashish. He shipped bears, lesser pandas, Tibetan ponies, and even baby one-horned rhinos. But his specialty was Tibetan mastiff dogs. Some went by air from Kathmandu, others via couriers on flights departing from India. Things went well until July 1972 when a crazed mastiff broke its cage on a BOAC flight to London, where the dog was tranquilized and put in a new cage. When customs agents burned the old cage, they

got a nose full. A short *Times of London* article entitled “Drugs Found in Dog Crates” (July 31, 1972, p. 2) reported that this accidental seizure of thousands of British pounds worth of cannabis could lead to “cracking of one of the biggest drugs rings operating.”⁷ A year later something similar happened with a shipment of bears in the San Francisco airport (Pietri 2001:24). This time authorities traced the shipment to Pietri who found himself wanted by the FBI and Interpol. But before these agencies could get him, Nepali officials simply hauled Pietri and a bunch of other drug dealers to the Indian border and kicked them out. After further exploits in Nepal (under false name and passport), and reportedly making millions shipping container-loads of hashish from Indian ports, Pietri eventually spent time in US jails before turning state’s witness and having charges dropped. Pietri’s book offers a fascinating window onto the worldviews and lifestyles of Kathmandu’s drug runners in the 1970s.

Bodhanath vs. Swayambhu: Variations on the Hippie Scene

Already by the late 1960s two distinct variants of the hippie expat scene had emerged in Kathmandu: one centered on Bodhanath, the Buddhist stupa and pilgrimage site east of Kathmandu, the other around Swayambhu, the Buddhist and Hindu hilltop temple complex just west of the old city. Though not everyone fit easily, and some moved between them, people nevertheless tended to self-select into one or the other. Each group held its own (usually negative) stereotypes about the other.

Terry Tarnoff—who arrived in Kathmandu in 1973—captures the tension between the two communities with good humor, though he eventually joined the Swayambhu set:

The Westerners in Bodha wore jeans and lumberjack shirts. The Westerners in Swayambhu wore pajama pants and Indian vests. The Westerners in Bodha lived in concrete houses with electricity, running water, and indoor toilets. The Westerners in Swayambhu lived in houses with thatched roofs and no chimneys. The Westerners in Bodha rode motorcycles and horses. The Westerners in Swayambhu piled eight to a taxi or, more frequently, walked.

The Westerners in Bodha drank alcohol and snorted cocaine. The Westerners in

7. Pietri (2001:17–19) describes this incident as having been brokered by an Indian restaurateur in Kathmandu who acted as an intermediary. Amazingly a perfectly analogous story appears in Tomory (1996:168) where a man describes being recruited by a Kathmandu restaurant owner to accompany a shipment of dogs from Calcutta to the US via London. He describes how the crates broke, the drugs were found, etc. The *Times of London* article further confirms the incident.

Swayambhu smoked hash and sniffed heroin. The Westerners in Bodha exported carpets to friends in the West to support their lifestyle. The Westerners in Swayambhu no longer knew anyone in the West. The Westerners in Bodha listened to the Eagles. The Westerners in Swayambhu listened to Van Morrison. The Westerners in Bodha were tough guys who climbed mountains and trekked to the middle of nowhere. The Westerners in Swayambhu had lungs so shot, they could barely make it up the hills to their houses.

It was a little like the Hatfields and McCoys, except that the Westerners in Bodha were too drunk and the Westerners in Swayambhu were too stoned to ever do anything about it. (2005:229–30)

Among the people I met, those in the Swayambhu crowd were more likely to self-identify as “hippies” whereas the Bodha set distanced themselves from the term, reserving it for the “stoned freaks” on the *other side* of the valley. Swayambhu “was a place more for the high kites, the heavy freaks, the space cadets, and too much for me [whereas] Bodhanath was less intense” (in Tomory 1996:187). Jerry Beisler, himself the very model of Bodhanath tough guy, derided the Swayambhu scene for

the endless-party lifestyle that had become established by a snobby, European trust-fund contingent. There was no interest in spiritual knowledge, historical research, or mountaineering by this social set; they lived for drugs, sex, and full moon blow-outs. (2006:165)

Members of the Swayambhu crowd had much the same opinion of those from Bhoda. Swayambhu types were “more individualistic, not out for a lot of social life,” remembered one former resident who also stressed that people in Swayambhu were more likely to be “interested in Nepal, learning Nepali, getting to know local people, like that.” By contrast, he claimed, the Bodha set was more social, communal, and into partying. What’s more, they tended to identify almost completely with Tibet. “Nepal is almost meaningless to them.” Instead, they had created their own little expat universe that they imagined to be Buddhist, but really wasn’t. Another person scornfully referred to the Bodhanath group as the “rug and drug gang,” people who sold Tibetan carpets, and maybe dubious antiques, as a front for illegal hash smuggling. Clearly, both sides considered the other to be drugged-out party animals with only superficial attachments to their adopted home.

Beyond the name-calling, each location *did* have a distinct ethos. Along with other drug smugglers, Pietri lived in Bodha which he referred to as the “Dodge City” of Nepal—full of drug runners, gangsters, and tough

CIA-backed Tibetan Khampa guerillas (2001:9). Another person told me of the “really scary” people who lived in Bodha including Danish hashish and heroin dealers who carried knives and weren’t afraid to use them. Jerry Beisler described the Bodha community as “international free-style life artists and adventurers” (2006:62), people who had no qualms about using drug money to finance their artistic, adventurous lives. Few in the Bodhanath scene were armed drug thugs but most seemed to revel in the tough-guy image inflected through a quasi-Tibetan lens. The Humpayetti Trekking Company was a quintessential Bodhanath enterprise.

Swayambhu attracted the more hard-core “serious seekers” or “dharma bums” as well as more intense drug users, the two groups often overlapping. LSD guru Michael Hollingshead lived in Swayambhu along with others who tended to superimpose the “psychedelic experience” onto Eastern religion, or some approximation thereof. For them drugs were a means of “escape from the prison of the ego,” a “Saturn rocket” to blast into “inner space” (Hollingshead 1973:103). For these seekers, the Swayambhu hill—crowned by an ancient temple whose history stretched back into mythological time—was a cosmic hot spot channeling energies in a seemingly magical way. Already by the late 1960s the nearby small Newar farming hamlets of Bijeswari and Kimdol were filling up with hippie seekers ranging from committed religious practitioners to serious drug addicts.

One iconic Swayambhu hippie institution was the Bakery Commune or Ashram. Nobody remembers who started the Bakery or when though it was probably around 1967, inspired by communal hippie institutions in San Francisco, Paris, and elsewhere. The group occupied two buildings: a defunct bakery that served as a kitchen and a long shed-like structure where people gathered, partied, and slept. The Bakery wasn’t a commune per se, but it was communal. One person who had hung out at the Bakery for years explained:

Hippies who’d been traveling from Europe ended up there. It was like a communal kitchen, but there were a few people running it. I don’t think there was any money being made or anything like that. A lot of it was just in the throes of certain things, like drugs—not hard drugs at that time, not at all. A lot of smoking—marijuana, ganja, Nepali hash, temple balls, and all that. . . . And acid—LSD—and mescaline. This was way before heroin or anything like that.

Another who lived there in 1969 remembered:

There was a *dhuni*, a sacred fire, in the middle of the floor, and a fine though unfinished mural of a circle—round the pivot of an OM mantra—on which were painted the

zodiacal signs, the planets, the sixty-four hexagrams of the I Ching, the twenty-two arcana of the Tarot, and much else besides. (in Tomory 1996:99)

Foreigners had watched Hindu Shaivite *sadhus* (holy men) seated around *dhuni* sacred fires smoking cannabis, and were eager to emulate the practice. According to one person I interviewed, at the Bakery,

there was always this [Western] sadhu guy maintaining the fire. Somebody was always keeping the fire going, and the chillums coming, and organizing the cooking. Everybody would just pitch in. You'd chip in your one rupee, or ten rupees, or you brought in some oranges. The mentality was communal.

The Bakery provided one meal of rice and vegetables per day, and recipients paid what they could.

In the fall of 1969 an already blissed-out Michael Hollingshead stumbled upon the “Bakery Ashram” almost by accident. Walking the path to Swayambhu, Hollingshead encountered a group of stoned hippies who asked if he had been to the Bakery. Curious, Hollingshead wandered off in the direction they pointed, following the sound of amplified Rock music until he “came suddenly upon a compound garden filled with lots of young Western heads, all dressed in their dhotis⁸ and Tibetan shirts and Indian silks” (1973:225–26).

Inside, seated quietly in a circle round a central fireplace, were about twenty people, mostly male. There were several chillums being passed around simultaneously. Room was made for me to join this charmed circle . . . The two five-foot Sony speakers made all verbal communication impossible. It was like sitting on stage with the Stones. . . .

Time ceased to exist for those of us who sat stoned in our mystical ring round the fire. And it was with this insight that I was born into a new world. A new form of consciousness had taken over, that we were somehow all together because in some strange way we had been *brought* here. It was as though a gust of wind had come from another existence, and had plucked us from the streets of Rome and London and Detroit, and propelled us to this Himalayan valley; our new myth-mother. (1973:226)

I can only assume that Hollingshead's prose, which now seems so cloyingly affected, really does convey something of the drugged-out experience. Many others shared his sense of having been almost magically gathered in the mystical Himalayas to be collectively reborn into a “new consciousness.” Having shared the ordeal of the RTK, each on a quasi-

8. A north Indian men's garment.

“This is a heavy place. It’s like all the old stuff doesn’t matter anymore. . . . It’s something you have to go through on your own. There’s a lot of people out here, some of them for years, they’ve learned things, put a lot together. Not everybody can take it. You’ve got to be strong.”

—ON THE KATHMANDU SCENE, EARLY 1970S (IN TARNOFF 2006: 322)

spiritual quest, people felt an intense bonding and convergence of energies, even if some of that feeling (and magic) was chemically induced.

The Bakery was famous for hosting extravagant Full Moon Parties. People would haul its famous sound system to a nearby field and blast music into the night, attracting hippies from far and wide, as well as many curious Nepalis. Writes Hollingshead:

It was traditional to take LSD at full moon, and people would congregate at the *Bakery Ashram*, and drop it in the late evening so that they could listen to music during the night, followed by a climb up to the Buddhist temples to join the monks for early morning service. (1973:239)

The Bakery staggered along for four or five years before its *dhuni* finally petered out. By the time Terry Tarnoff arrived in 1973 it “had been boarded up for months” (2005:332). Then, toward the end of 1973, two saffron-robed American Hare Krishna acolytes acquired the building and turned it into a Hare Krishna temple complete with scenes from the Bhagavad Gita painted on the walls, Swami Bhaktivedanta literature carefully displayed, and tasteful Indian ragas droning on the tape deck. Tarnoff describes how, on one full-moon evening, some hardened hippies descended on the befuddled monks, intent on recreating a party worthy of the Bakery’s glory days. Out went the ragas, in went the Rolling Stones.

Then a dozen chillums appeared and the room was covered in a giant mushroom cloud of hash smoke. . . . Crazy Helen . . . came by looking like a demented fairy princess. ‘Acid . . . acid . . . who wants acid?’ she said, holding a magic wand in one hand and a jar of LSD in the other . . .

Italian Carlotta showed up with plastic Hindu gods tied into her hair, Helen stripped naked, Ira wrote on a scrap of paper, Petra played violin, Angus beat against an Ethiopian kettledrum, Delia danced with abandon, and Jasper sipped from his flask. Paul looked happier than any man has a right to be, his eyes glistening as he looked over the reborn Bakery. (2005:334–35)

As the sun rose the party ended with the exhausted revelers sitting on the floor chanting the names of god: Hare Krishna, Hare Rama.

The Bakery’s conversion into a Hare Krishna temple was indicative of a more general institutionalization of a hippie counterculture that had earlier been spontaneous, naively earnest, and much less disciplined. The magical hippie experience was more and more difficult to conjure.

“The Great Rice Paper Adventure”: Leaders of the Swayambhu Scene

Although the Bakery disappeared, the Kathmandu scene, with its changing cast of characters, persisted through the 1970s. If the late 1960s Kathmandu scene had been an *extension* of a worldwide countercultural movement, by the mid-1970s it was looking ever more like a *remnant*. As the global pendulum swung back toward a more conservative mindset, what *had* appeared as youthful optimism increasingly looked like naive escapism. Most hippies went home, got jobs, and returned to their middle-class birthrights. But some stayed on, trying to keep alive the dream of a nonconformist and spiritually oriented, culturally attuned creative community in exile.

Among the leading figures in this group of holdouts were two couples: Ira Cohen and Petra Vogt, and Angus and Hetty MacLise. Each has an amazing biography, having been part of nearly every iconic movement and happening that we now associate with the 1960s youth counterculture. Disillusioned with the West, in the early 1970s they moved to Nepal, hoping to continue their lives and art in ways that were increasingly impossible back home. These four became pillars of the Kathmandu hippie expat community.

Born in 1935 (d. 2011) Ira Cohen came of age somewhere between the Beat Generation and the hippie era and in many ways bridged the two. He grew up in New York City and attended Cornell University where he studied under Vladimir Nabokov before moving to Morocco in the early 1960s. There he edited *GNAOUA*, a literary magazine that published works by Beat Generation authors like William Burroughs. In the mid-1960s Cohen returned to New York and began photographing subjects reflected in bendable Mylar mirror-like material, producing fantastically rippling images of Jimi Hendrix, John McLaughlin, Charles Ludlam, and others. In 1968 he directed the award-winning, avant-garde film *Invasion of the Thunderbolt Pagoda*,⁹ a dreamlike (or LSD trip-like) work featuring Mylar

9. “A Village Voice reviewer said one left the film ‘perched full-lotus on a cloud of incense, chatting with a white rabbit and smoking a banana’” (Martin 2011).

visual effects. Cohen also produced a documentary on the Living Theater group's 1968 season.

Founded by Julian Beck and Judith Malina, the Living Theater was an avant-garde theatrical company based in New York City (Tytell 1995:xi). Cohen first encountered the theater when it performed "Paradise Now" at Yale University. In the final scene ("Rite of Universal Intercourse"), bikini- and G-string-clad actors "began to grapple in communal embrace [and were then] joined by almost two hundred spectators, many of whom were partially or totally disrobed." When the play ended, audience and caste members streamed out onto the streets where mace-wielding police awaited them. Ten of them were arrested, including Cohen, who was "wearing a colorful sari" (Tytell 1995:240). Cohen documented the company's radical work and its controversial public reception.

Through his work with the Living Theater, Cohen met Petra Vogt, a classically trained German actress who had joined company in 1962 (Tytell 1995:217). Vogt's time with the company was volatile, marked by several drug-related breakdowns and arrests (Tytell 1995:269, 281). Vogt eventually left the group and teamed up with Cohen. "Suddenly the sixties were over," Cohen recalled, and in 1970 they left New York for Europe, North Africa, and the overland Road to Kathmandu:

We intended a brief visit, but fell under the spell of this Shangri-La in the Himalayas where it was not difficult to believe that, as long as we remained, we would stay young forever writing poems touched by the magic of high tantric strivings under the blue cloud-filled skies, there at the top of the world.¹⁰

In Kathmandu they were soon joined by Ira's "old friend and comrade" Angus MacLise who, with his wife, Hetty, had known Cohen for years in Morocco and New York. Angus MacLise (1938–1979) was a leading figure in New York's avant-garde arts scene where he worked as a film-maker, musician, composer, poet, and actor. Along with Lou Reed, in 1965 MacLise founded the Velvet Underground, widely regarded as among the most influential alternative rock bands of the 1960s.¹¹ Unlike the airy pop tunes on the radio, the Velvet Underground's songs were "much darker" featuring drug-dealers, sadomasochists, crime, and decadence. Its music was full of elements that went on to define punk rock: "churning rhythm guitars or the startling blasts of feedback and white noise, the desperate, primal aggression or the quiet, painful introspection" (Derogatis 1996:42–

10. <http://www.bigbridge.org/issue5/irabook/htm> (accessed 1/27/08).

11. Though Lou Reed is now remembered as the band's leading figure, posters advertising its early gigs refer to the group as "Angus MacLise and the Velvet Underground" (MacLise 2011:40).

44). MacLise soon left the band (accusing it of “selling out” when it started taking paying gigs) but continued performing with other artists including Yoko Ono.¹² In 1968 MacLise composed and performed the sound track for Cohen’s *Thunderbolt Pagoda*. He continued to work as a musician, poet, and literary editor until 1970 when he and Hetty moved to British Columbia where they hoped to settle.¹³ Unable to get work visas, they headed for Asia and ended up in Kathmandu.

Hetty (née McGee) MacLise (1931–2011), too, had an amazing life story. Born in England, she headed for the Beat exile community in Tangier in 1964 where she became friends with William Burroughs, Paul Bowles, and other literary figures including Ira Cohen. By 1966 she was in San Francisco where she fell in with, among others, Ken Kesey and Owsley Stanley (the LSD chemist). For a while she dated Grateful Dead frontman Ron “Pigpen” McKernan and performed as a background musician on the Dead’s recording of “Dark Star.” She also became friends with Janis Joplin, Grace Slick (of the Jefferson Airplane), Andy Warhol, James Taylor, and Arlo Guthrie (and she appeared in Guthrie’s “Alice’s Restaurant” movie, shot in 1968). It was while working as art editor of the *San Francisco Oracle*—the Haight-Ashbury underground newspaper that became the mouthpiece of the hippie movement during the 1967 Summer of Love—that Hetty met Angus MacLise when he walked in with poetry he hoped to publish. The two were married in Golden Gate Park on the spring equinox of 1967 by none other than Timothy Leary (acting as chief priest of the League for Spiritual Discovery, his new religion that had LSD as its sacrament), with members of the Grateful Dead as witnesses.¹⁴

FBI narcotics squads eventually shut down the Haight-Ashbury scene and in the fall of 1968 Hetty and Angus headed for New York City where they lived with Ira Cohen. They had a child, Ossian, and Hetty sold paintings and worked for the *East Village Other*. In 1969 Hetty and Angus attended the Woodstock Music Festival and worked with Wavy Gravy and the Hog Farm crew on preparations.¹⁵ Increasingly unhappy with political and cultural repression in the US, in 1970 the family headed to Canada and finally India where they lived at the Auroville ashram in Pondicherry. But when their toddler son became ill, their thoughts turned to cooler climes:

12. See http://www.blastitude.com/13/ETERNITY/angus_macalise.htm (accessed 1/27/08).

13. See <http://www.earthrites.org/turfing/?p=3335> (accessed 1/27/08).

14. From an interview with Hetty MacLise available at http://images.phantomlyoracula.com/hetty/uploaded_images/art-3-722527.jpg (accessed 9/29/10).

15. http://images.phantomlyoracula.com/hetty/uploaded_images/art-3-722527.jpg (accessed 9/29/10).

A friend came back to the ashram who'd been up to Nepal for a holiday and she said you could get things like pie and cheese in Kathmandu. We'd been living on dhal and bananas. We had no idea where we'd stay when we got there. And then, out of the blue, a friend [probably Ira Cohen] wrote inviting us to come up there and stay with him.

Flying into Kathmandu in August 1971, “the sun was shining on the water paddies as we landed and it was magical. We came directly to Swayambhu.”¹⁶ Hetty soon cut her hair, started studying Tibetan, and dressed as a Tibetan Buddhist nun.¹⁷

Once settled, the four friends set about “living in Nepal.” Ira and Angus hooked up with the expat woodblock printing community, other poets and artists, and John Chick who had started the Spirit Catcher Bookstore near Freak Street. With Piero Heliczer (another old friend from the New York scene) Angus resumed an interest in handcrafted letterpress art books—something he and Heliczer had pursued together in Paris in the 1950s with the “Dead Language Press.”¹⁸ In Kathmandu they experimented with unusual locally produced papers and unconventional printing formats inspired by old, horizontally printed Tibetan and Nepali books. Before long the Spirit Catcher Bookstore became a focal point for the expat hippie arts scene which continued attracting new members, including poet Charles Henri Ford.¹⁹ The Spirit Catcher sponsored regular poetry reading events (hosted and organized by Ira²⁰) and helped publish new work. In 1974 John Chick published the first of Cohen’s Kathmandu poetry collections (the Starstreams Poetry series) under Chick’s Bardo Matrix imprint. That same year Angus revived his Dreamweapon Press imprint (begun in 1965 in New York [MacLise 2011:63]) and began publishing new works of poetry. Angus also produced an occasional magazine called *Ting Pa* which, printed on local paper, experimented with different formats (some as large as a newspaper) and featured calligraphy, woodblock

16. http://www.phantomlyoracula.com/2007_3_01_archive.html (accessed 9/29/10).

17. In his book *Magic Bus* (2006b) Rory MacLean claims to have twice met an aging hippie named Hetty, seemingly by chance, while traversing the old Hippie Trail in the early 2000s. Although MacLean’s “Hetty” is obviously Hetty MacLise, whether MacLean actually met her, or whether he fictionalized encounters, is unclear. Either way, MacLean’s cliché and error-ridden book doesn’t lend much credibility to his claims.

18. <http://www.bigbridge.org/issue5/irabook.htm> (accessed 1/27/08); <http://tomraworth.com/pierosite/ph.html> (accessed 7/1/11); <http://boo-hooray.com/dreamweapon/the-art—life-of-angus-maclise-1938–1979> (accessed 7/1/11).

19. Charles Henri Ford (1918–2002) was an American poet and novelist that had been part of every American countercultural expat scene since the Lost Generation in Paris. It was almost inevitable that he, having also lived in Morocco, would show up in Kathmandu where he purchased a house and lived for years.

20. See http://www.blastitude.com/13/ETERNITY/ira_cohen.htm (accessed 1/27/08).

prints, and poetry by Nepali and Western writers.²¹ What Ira called "the great rice paper adventure" had begun.²²

On October 11, 1974, Ira, Angus, and others gave the world premiere performance of a prose poem/play by Gregory Corso, one of the Beat Generation's inner circle. They booked the Crystal Ballroom of the recently opened Yak & Yeti Hotel and invited everyone for what was probably the high point of the expat community's social season. "There was a packed house made up of hippies, embassy officials, narcs, Russian émigrés, swamis, straight tourists, you name it," said Cohen.²³ Petra Vogt, though not in the cast, arrived in full theatrical glam. One person I interviewed remembered her dramatic entrance:

Petra walked in dressed like a bride, but all in black. Not white, but black. With sequins on her eyelids and everything. They had special seats up front and she walked down the aisle with little girls holding the train in the back. I mean she was out to get attention, and she got it.

In the coming years Ira and Angus published numerous poetry chapbooks of their own work plus works by well-known poets including Charles Henri Ford, Gregory Corso, and Paul Bowles. With help from Nepali and Tibetan craftsmen, each book was a handmade work of art. Ira and Angus collected different kinds of handmade paper from around Nepal and Bhutan. They had special woodblocks cut to illustrate each volume. They experimented with different bindings, inks, and covers, including some wrapped in velvet. They included engraved works by Nepali artist Jimmy Thapa. Cohen recalled, "There was a very special collaboration going on here between the artists and artisans, Nepalis and Foreigners, which was mutually inspiring and gives the books their unique quality."²⁴

Just about everyone who encountered Petra and Ira during their Kathmandu years remarks on their outrageous sense of style. Ira braided purple thread into his beard and "looked like a sage from sixteenth-century Japan, with his balding pate, long beard, black-velvet cape, purple shirt, and silver scarf" (Tarnoff 2005:328). According to Beisler,

21. *Ting Pa* was part of an ambitious publishing scheme that MacLise hoped would, via subscriptions, allow him to live in Kathmandu self-supported (MacLise 2011:63). The plan never made it off the ground.

See also http://www.blastitude.com/13/ETERNITY/ira_cohen.htm (accessed 1/27/08).

22. See <http://www.bigbridge.org/issue5/irabook.htm> (accessed 1/27/08) and <http://www.earthrites.org/turfing/?p=333>.

23. See <http://www.bigbridge.org/issue5/irabook.htm> (accessed 1/27/08).

24. See <http://www.bigbridge.org/issue5/irabook.htm> (accessed 1/27/08).

Petra dressed 1940s New York City; a pillbox hat, veil, and padded-shoulder camel hair overcoat with velvet trim. Ira dressed real sporty as well. The couple always arrived in a 1950 cream-colored Cadillac that they had acquired from some fallen-on-hard-times Nepali and restored to pristine running condition. (2006:184)

Describing Kathmandu in the 1970s, Doig writes, “Ira Cohen, the poet and his unfailingly, dramatically beautiful artist wife, Petra, will cut an unforgettable swathe through Freak Street trailing acolytes” (1994:106). One expat remembered these traveling packs as “a cult kind of a thing.” With Ira and Petra, “there’d be like fifteen or twenty of them walking down New Road in these big huge capes, all in purple and black. It was great! I mean terrific style.”

“They were *so dramatic!*” a Nepali friend remembered. Another noted that, by the mid-1970s, Petra “looked strikingly like Kali, the goddess of death and destruction” (Tarnoff 2005:328). Not everyone in the expat community appreciated what Petra and Ira were doing, accusing them of being culturally insensitive (to Nepalis) and even downright sinister. In the memory of one person who lived in Kathmandu in the mid-1970s,

Ira used to dress like a witch. I mean, they both used to dress like witches. Like, if you were walking down an alley on a cold, foggy winter day and you suddenly saw them coming toward you! [Shrinks back in mock fright.] I mean he had this long hair—he was bald on the top—but he had this long hair in dread locks. And she was dressed up with sequins in her hair and her face was done up like a skull. . . . I mean, she had these *long* nails and she’d go [lunging menacingly] “Haaah!” at people. She’d suddenly do that to people. They were into shock value. Frankly I didn’t even want to know them.

People who *did* get to know Petra and Ira seem to have found them a lot less menacing. One person who lived with them described to me a typical day at their house:

Well, they woke up late. They did a lot of reading. They did a lot of entertaining, people always flowing in and out of the house. There’d be music. There’d always be some interesting person who had come from somewhere or the other. There were always, like, discussion groups, you know—kind of like book clubs in a way. Ira loved photography of course. He’d go around [shooting photos]. Petra did a lot of art. She did a lot of these pen and ink sketches.

Others remembered Petra as someone forever organizing events—from soirees, to exhibits, to performances. “One day Petra decided to have a Be-in,” one person told me. “So we developed this whole Be-in and we

put signs up all over the place. Then it rained that day so we didn’t go.” It seems Ira and Petra treated their stay in Kathmandu as an extended “Be-in.” It was life as performance art.

Though less in the spotlight, Hetty and Angus MacLise were living out their own dramas. Hetty devoted much of her time to parenting which took a dramatic turn when their son, Ossian—who had grown up playing with young monks at the Swayambhu monasteries—asked to become a monk himself. Then, around 1976, at age seven, Ossian was recognized as a *tulku*, took the name Karma Tsultrim, and became the first Westerner ever identified as a reincarnate lama.²⁵

Angus’s life took a more tragic turn. Of Angus and Hetty, one expat remembered:

They were very active—making things, doing things. They were artists, and poets, and musicians, and junkies. Angus was a junkie, a bad junkie. He came out of a junkie scene. When he came out [to Kathmandu], he was already into heroin in a bad way. I mean a lot of those guys were just madly experimental with their own minds.

By the late 1970s Angus’s health was deteriorating and on June 21, 1979, the summer solstice, he died (officially of hypoglycemia) at the Shanta Bhawan Hospital in Kathmandu. He was cremated according to Tibetan rites.

Ira Cohen’s poem “Ballad of the Gone MacLise” commemorates the life and death of one of his closest friends, as excerpted below:

Down at the Snowman I heard
them discussing your cremation
A dervish has fallen off the roof,
the tall skinny one with the coathanger shoulders
Now the shades of Mecca are drawn for you, Poet, . . .
Your unsatisfied cravings fly out of the pyre,
the blessings of your friend crackle w/ ghee
the white and black til seeds burn in
the untrammled day & still you are wandering Angus,
passing thru the Bardo keyhole.
Listen once more to those Tibetan horns,
they are calling you past Freak Street
where you sold the White Goddess for junk
Forget all your regrets & go now w/ the egret,

25. http://www.phantomlyoracula.com/2007_3_01_archive.html (accessed 9/29/10)

Enjoying life, I look forward to death with the eagerness of a lover. The stars will be mine!—and the final depths of poetry.

—ANGUS MACLISE’S LAST POEM, JUNE 10, 1979 (MACLISE 2011: 115)

put on your robe of sky. . . .

Farewell, MacLise, thawing on the Riverbank,

I do not expect to meet your like again. (Cohen 1986:75–76)

Angus’s death marked the end of an era for his close friends. What had begun a decade earlier as a global youth project persisted for a time in isolated outposts like Kathmandu before finally succumbing to many of the same forces that hippies had originally fled in the West. Describing his decision to leave Nepal, Ira mentioned some of these factors:

In 1979 Angus MacLise died on the Summer Solstice and the cycle seemed to be over. The great rice paper adventure drew to a close as most of us left Nepal and moved on. It became more difficult to continue on limited funds, the emphasis on “bona fide” tourists increased, and the valley was filled with all the worst signs of twentieth century commodification. For a few years we were privileged to help turn the prayer wheels of this Himalayan kingdom which gave us a sense of being Akashic Agents, dedicated to preserving the records of our time, there in Shangri-La.²⁶

Ira sold his personal library to a used-book dealer on Freak Street (books with Ira’s name in them are still in local collections) and returned to New York City. Petra moved to Rajasthan and joined a tantric Hindu sect. Hetty returned to Britain, and Ossian stayed in the monastery through his teens before leaving the order and moving to London.

Conclusion: The Power of Misunderstanding

Today Dr. Abhi Subedi is a distinguished Nepali writer and professor of English in Kathmandu. In the 1970s he spent years in close association with Cohen, MacLise, and other artists in the Kathmandu literary scene. He remembers looking for his Western friends one day:

26. <http://www.bigbridge.org/issue5/irabook.htm> (accessed 1/27/08).

I was looking for them and went to all the places they used to go and finally, when I went to Pashupatinath, there they were, sitting next to these naked sadhus who had Seiko watches tied to their penises! Sitting next to these pot-smoking sadhus were my friends, looking timid and defeated. Their mouths were pursed and it looked like they were going to cry! I mean, they were nobodies in front of these sadhus. The sadhus had outdone them. When they came from the West they thought they were really big, doing all this smoking and living this freaky life. But in front of these sadhus they were completely overshadowed. They were outdone at their own game!²⁷

But Subedi didn't condemn his hippie friends for their hubris. Rather, he was awed by their childlike openness, their willingness to reach into the unknown, and their eagerness to push the boundaries of experience—even if, ultimately, they failed to grasp what was going on around them. Speaking of the hippies and the sadhus, Subedi continued:

They understood the pipe, not the philosophy. Their power of misunderstanding was their power. They understood Shiva just as an expansion of their own minds. They were focused on love and cosmic consciousness. I am still moved by this way of life.

For Subedi it mattered less that these people failed to understand what they were doing than that they were there *trying* to understand it. Their power was “the power of misunderstanding,” the power of trying to transform something virtually incomprehensible—such as a band of outrageous sadhus that embodied a universe of meaning to which they had little access—into “an expansion of their own minds.” That is, they could only use their own experience to understand those they encountered in places like Nepal, but in so doing, they mistook the other for themselves. Subedi's point is that mistaking others for oneself is a far more redeeming fault than the opposite: failing to recognize a common humanity. The difference is the spirit of “love and cosmic consciousness” that the hippies (at their best) brought to their encounters in Nepal. It is this spirit—one that *assumed* a shared humanity and sought to experience and celebrate that bond—that Subedi still reveres, even as he acknowledges its inevitable shortcomings (cf. Subedi 2002). There is power in this kind of misunderstanding.

I asked Subedi what people like Ira and Angus had, ultimately, learned in and from Nepal. “Not a lot,” he said:

27. From a lecture (in Nepali) given by Subedi at Martin Chautari in Kathmandu on January 24, 2008.

Like Ira Cohen didn't know *any* Nepali. Angus didn't know any either. Michael Hollingshead—the same. They lived here for—how long?—and maybe picked up a few words. They were in their own little world and remained very, very Western. They were just visiting this place. They never left the Swayambhu area. That means they had some kind of very imaginative microcosm, a kind of attachment that they had created on their own. And that's where they lived and felt comfortable, and felt that their minds were expanding, *and that was wonderful!* But they saw no need to open up [to a world beyond their own].

As in the epigraph that opened this chapter, for Ira and Angus and many others, Kathmandu existed to change them. Kathmandu was an “imaginative microcosm” that came largely *pre-imagined*, their attachment to it one “they had created on their own.” Still, they had lived a dream that few had the courage, or humanity, to contemplate.

Hippie Ko Pala (The Age of Hippies)

Trip-enthralled in the clutch of her beat prince,
 belly-bare in saffron sari and blouse, overripe melons
 hoisted before her, flower baby hippie maiden
 strolls down New Road—all eyes embedded in her navel.
 The loitering godsons of the Bo tree
 spouting hard-ons, throng the benches there.
 Filth discarded by Public Service Commission Drainage
 and jaundiced eyes rifling a newspaper
 look towards the coming day.

FROM "EVENING, NEW ROAD, A BURLESQUE OF LIFE," BY BHUPI SHERCHAN¹

What did people in Kathmandu think of the hordes of young Westerners that descended on their city in ever-growing numbers from the late 1960s onward? How did Nepalis view foreigners who, fleeing a sociopolitical context far removed from Nepal's daily life, transplanted their countercultural lifestyles into Nepal? What did it mean for locals to live among hippies eager to cast off nearly every social inhibition that weighed on them back home? What was it like to live among some of the most freakish "freaks" the Western countercultural scene had ever produced?

Drawing on dozens of interviews, I examine how Nepalis made sense of the foreigners they encountered and the roles these travelers played in Nepalis' lives. I also take a closer look

1. Translation by Wayne Amtzis: <http://www.photo-poems.com/files/translation.html> (accessed 12/4/14). See Hutt 2010:118–19 for an alternative English translation.

at the lives of some of the few Nepalis who crossed over into the hippie world. These “Nepali hippies” and their experiences offer important insights into *how* and *for whom* the Western counterculture resonated with similar political and cultural critiques circulating within Nepali youth culture. I suggest that Nepal’s experience with Western counterculture mustn’t be understood as transference or “impact,” but as *encounter*—as Nepal’s own burgeoning counterculture engaged with foreign youth radicalism in mutually transformative ways.

Nepalis Make Sense of Budget Tourists in the 1960s and 1970s

“Hippie” entered the Nepali lexicon not long after it was coined in the West in the late 1960s. For Nepalis the word distinguished the new breed of young, countercultural, budget tourists from earlier tourists—older, wealthier, and more aloof. Hippies, by contrast, were knocking on doors in the old city looking for places to stay, hanging out in droves on temple platforms, and making their presence conspicuously felt.

Today the word “**hippie**”² often has negative connotations for Nepalis (meaning “vulgar, unkempt, antisocial”), but many people we spoke with defended hippies of the past, arguing that they weren’t the “bad people” the modern term implies. One former lodge owner chastised my young Nepali coworker for even asking about hippies:

Why are you people asking so much about **hippies**? What’s so bad about them? They just wore big and dirty clothes, slept where they liked, and ate what they wanted. They didn’t do bad things. Sure, they were dirty. They had gone to India before they got here. They made friends with *sadhus* and picked up their style and then came here with that. Nowadays tourists come mostly by plane. They’ve got more money.

In fact many Nepalis made sense of hippies by comparing them with Hindu renouncers. Hippies seemed to be some version of these familiar religious ascetics who cast social convention to the wind in pursuit of spiritual attainment. An elderly curio dealer on Basantapur Square noted:

I don’t know why they were called **hippies** but that’s what we called them. They had hair like yogis and these long beards. They used to eat anywhere and sleep anywhere.

2. Words in boldface indicate English usage in otherwise Nepali (or Newari) speech. Thus *hippie ko pala* is translated as “the age of hippies.”

Nowadays these kinds of people don't come. Maybe they've become more developed [*bikasit*] than before.

Another Freak Street area merchant recalled:

What we would call sadhus they called **hippies**—in my opinion. I mean, they had a **free life**, living this blissful existence, worrying about nothing, not even money. They used to eat as much as they wanted, smoke ganja as much as they wanted. We Nepalis drink booze and go crazy but [with ganja] they would just get peaceful and quiet. There used to be stoned **freaks** all around here. That's why they called it **Freak Street**. "**Freak**" means just that: the pleasure of bliss and relaxation.

Others took the religious mendicant analogy further:

Those early ones were **holy tourists**. They just roamed around the world visiting holy pilgrimage places. They were in search of happiness and trying to find the place that could satisfy them, give them *ananda* [bliss].

Many noted their willingness to eat anything anywhere and to sleep wherever they liked. These are important observations coming from people for whom daily activities like eating and sleeping are closely tied to caste standards of ritual purity and pollution. On these grounds hippie behavior was disgusting but also enviable for its rejection of constricting social parameters. By choosing to view hippies as a species of Hindu renouncer—sadhus, fakirs, and yogis who thumb their noses at social strictures in pursuit of higher planes of existence—Nepalis were making sense of, but also condoning, even idealizing, a lifestyle they understood as worthy.

This sense of familiarity with (even ownership of) the word "hippie" came through in a conversation with one man who was convinced Nepalis themselves had coined the term:

I think we Nepalis gave them this name **hippie**. For them, how can they be **hippies**? They didn't *come* with that name. They're tourists! . . . In fact the language we used gradually changed. They were these people who were **happy** in everything and **happy happy** became **hippie hippie**!

Like most South Asians, Nepalis view religious renunciators with ambivalence and the same was true of hippies. An exchange published in the state-run newspaper *Gorkhpatra* in 1970 illustrates this tension nicely.³

3. I am grateful to Ram Tiwari for bringing this material to my attention.

In a lengthy article, Dr. Pinaki Prasad Acharya defended Western youth against criticisms circulating among educated Nepalis. Referring to them as “not political rebels but religious rebels,” Acharya describes hippies as “dissatisfied with their own society and their own Christian religion” and eager to adopt Hinduism and other South Asian ways (Acharya v.s. 2027a). A few days later a letter to the editor responds, calling Acharya’s article “idle nonsense” (*ganthan*) (Kumar v.s. 2027). In response, Acharya penned another letter headed “Hippies Are Spreading Nepal’s Glory around the World,” which cites as evidence the experience of a Nepali official recently returned from Boston where he had heard Hindu devotional songs playing on the radio (Acharya 2027b)! In the debate over their moral impact, Acharya implies that hippies are more a threat to their home societies than to Nepal. Nepalis should feel flattered, not threatened.⁴

Business people we spoke with often cast their ambivalence in terms of “then and now,” with many of them describing a kind of golden age of Nepali/tourist interaction. One Freak Street area lodge owner said:

Before, like the people who came in the 1960s and 1970s, we can remember their faces. *They* were friendly, *we* were friendly, always talking, talking. But nowadays [tourists] think that if I try to speak with them, that I’m going to cheat them. Maybe they’ve been cheated in India so when I speak they think, “Oh, this will be some kind of bad thing.” Now they just say “hello,” and go to their rooms. I could tell them so many things about this place. It’s my job! But nobody wants to speak.

A shopkeeper in Maruhiti who grew up around hippies remembered how

before, we used to respect them a lot. I mean, these tourists were like gods! But now that way of thinking has decreased. . . . Before tourists used to be friendly and talk to us, but now they go on their own way. They think they’re better than us. They think they don’t need to talk with us. Before, they used to be very good. Because they respected us, we felt we could respect them too. Now when I say *namaste* to them they don’t even respond. I think they might feel unsafe and that’s maybe why they feel afraid.

A curio dealer with a shop near Freak Street simply sighed: “It used to be like heaven here.”

While it’s easy to see romantic nostalgia in these comments, I believe that the early tourist encounter really did have a different character. There

4. Dr. Acharya’s comments sparked so many replies that *Gorkhapatra* editors begged readers to stop sending letters on the matter.

was an innocent novelty in relations between foreigners and Nepalis, *each side* viewing the other with a sense of wonder and eagerness for human contact. Inevitably time and commercialization have recast those relationships in instrumental terms, transforming the players into calculating agents intent on maximizing gain rather than engaging in human interaction.

Business people's memories of hippies tended to be mixed—ranging from parasitic freeloaders to carefree spendthrifts—often in comparison with today's budget tourists. One Freak Street area lodge owner explained, "**Hippies** used to be extreme **budget tourists**. They tried to get all they could for free. **Budget tourists** at least spend some money but those ones [hippies] just slept wherever they wanted." Others remember differently. "Oh, they had money," explained one shopkeeper, "but they wanted **free lives**. Tourists now are worthless. Then they used to spend a lot of money. Tourists now are **budget tourists**. **Hippies** weren't **budget tourists**." Another called the people he deals with now "*jumra* tourists"—literally "lice tourists": cheap, mean, and good for nothing.

Many suspected that while hippies may have *looked* poor, they weren't. "Can anyone come here without money?" a Maruhiti area shopkeeper asked.

You tell me! They may have looked poor but it's not like in our country. A month of work [there] would be enough for three months of sitting and eating [here]. Why *wouldn't* they come? I remember one guy, a newspaper seller, who stayed for six months. *A newspaper seller for six months!*

One of the sons of the Camp Hotel's proprietor remembered hippies as carefree types happy for a free lift or place to sleep. But, he wasn't fooled by their "hobby poverty":

They did that not because they had to, but because they wished to. I mean, how were they going to get all the way to Kathmandu without any money? They'd say they'd been through some eight different countries before they got here. In my opinion it was like their **hobby**. Sometimes they'd come and say they only had one hundred dollars left to get back home. But I didn't believe it! If they didn't have money, they could easily get it. That's what I think. Sure, by the time they got here they were dirty and stinking. But that's because they'd been hitchhiking for months and hadn't bathed, not because they were poor.

Dealing with young foreigners also had downsides, especially when their impecunious habits led to dishonesty. Curio dealers complained of shoplifting: "One time a guy looking at a statue just ran off with it! I ran

after him, but couldn't catch him. That statue was worth five hundred rupees!" A Maruhiti area lodge owner voiced a common complaint about unscrupulous guests:

They'd have some worthless old camera and they'd come saying a new camera worth twenty thousand [rupees] had been stolen. What could we do? Our *whole house* cost thirty thousand! So that kind of people also came. They'd stay here for ten rupees and even if we asked them to keep valuables in a safe place, they'd say they were lost and blame us. They'd want us to make police reports and insurance claims. Hah! You think we had insurance?

The worst was when a tourist went missing or died, leaving lodge owners with unclaimed bags, police hassles, and in some cases anxious or bereaved parents coming from abroad to look for their children.

In general, older generations were more critical of exotic foreigners than were Nepali youth who looked at these same people with a sense of intrigued curiosity. One person remembered elderly Newars cursing hippies in Newari when they met them on the streets. Parents tried to keep their children away from foreign influences. One man who grew up near Freak Street said adults would criticize young Nepalis who imitated foreigners:

They used to insult us very much, saying that we were getting corrupted. **Hippies** meant something very negative to them. I mean, they used to do whatever they liked. . . . At a time when Nepali girls wouldn't dare show an ankle, or married couples wouldn't even walk on the streets together, these **hippie** boys and girls were walking with their arms around each other and kissing openly. This really shocked people.

Another person described how he used to love listening to Western music and would skip class to dance and hang out with friends:

My parents used to scold me: "You're getting a lot of bad habits!" But I would console them by saying, "When we listen to these songs we learn their language [English] very easily and later it will help us earn lots of money." Saying this, I lied! But they couldn't stop us. Then I used to cheat my parents but now I feel that I cheated myself. That's why I ended up doing this kind of work. [A high school dropout, this man made a meager living as a truck driver.]

In the early 1970s a Kathmandu cinema screened the 1969 French film *Les chemins de Katmandou* (The Roads to Kathmandu) which some remember as turning opinions against the hippies.

After seeing that movie people started thinking, “So, this is the way these tourists are?” In the movie they showed hippies stealing statues from temples, girls acting like prostitutes, cheating, lying, whatever. We didn’t care but the old ones didn’t like it at all. Parents tried to keep their kids away from the tourists but, in the end, they just couldn’t.

Given that discontent with hippies was common, the tolerance that foreigners experienced was in part because people in Kathmandu were too polite, too shy, or too busy to voice their opinions.

For Nepalis there was plenty to be upset about. Foremost was drug use: by the late 1960s Kathmandu newspapers regularly featured letters complaining of foreigners’ drug use and its negative impact on Nepali youth. When the US began pressuring Nepal’s government to delegalize drugs, Nepali politicians began blaming foreigners for rising rates of drug abuse among Nepali youth.⁵ Others acknowledged Nepal’s drug problem but stopped short of blaming foreigners. A Nepali official I interviewed commented, “It’s not because of the hippies. It was because the drugs were here. The drugs were here and they would have come even without tourists. Look at other cities: they never had tourists but the [drug] problem is there.”

By far the other most common complaint leveled against hippies concerned sexuality. For young Westerners, behaviors that were unremarkable back home—hand-holding, kissing, wearing revealing clothing—were erotically charged in Nepal and unacceptable in public. Most offensive, and memorable, were displays of public nudity. Nearly everyone I spoke with recalled incidents of nude hippies. Some remembered drug addicts lying naked in the streets, having sold their last stitch of clothing. Another recalled a man who had managed to climb to the roof of one of the old palace buildings in Kathmandu’s Durbar Square where he stood, stark naked, worshipping the sun. “The guards couldn’t find a key so it took them a long time to get up there to grab this guy. But within an hour there were thousands of people standing around looking up at this guy. It was great fun!” Drugs were typically involved. One person I interviewed described encountering several Western women lying naked in New Road one evening. “They were stoned on LSD and crying out ‘Help me! Help me!’ We were passing by and saw this crowd gathered but nobody even understood what they were saying. And the police also, they were just looking on and laughing.”

5. Many Nepalis still blame the country’s drug problems on hippie tourism (Chand 2000:69; Raj 2007:47).

How much sexual contact took place between Nepalis and foreigners is hard to say but, by all accounts, it was rare. As I have discussed in more detail elsewhere (Liechty 1996, 2001, 2005) there was relatively little casual sexual contact between Western males and Nepali women though at least a few Western women did sleep with willing Nepali men. One Nepali man I interviewed remembered how

if you went to places like Yin Yang, Star Pie, or Pleasure Rooms and other places on Freak Street you'd see all these [Western] males and females and they'd get high and they'd be touching and kissing. Nepalis would see this and say, "Wow, these people really are free about sex and everything." And the Western women *did*—at least a few of them—they did go around sleeping with local guys. And, you know, if you had one guy who slept with a Western woman, then he'd go and brag to a hundred other people. So before long you had Nepali guys sitting around horny and thinking, "Wow, these Western women are really wild and crazy!"

Certainly the most fascinating theory of hippie sexuality came from an elderly Maruhiti area businessman. "Do you know why **hippies** came?" he asked knowingly.

I'll tell you. They had a meeting in America, in the beginning. They wanted to make a hybrid [*khacara*—literally, "mule"] out of Nepalis and **hippies**. They wanted to have our seed [*biu*]. How would they do this? They [Americans] wouldn't do it without any plan because it would earn them ill fame. So they would send people named "**hippie**"—both boys and girls. They knew that we were brave and bold, so they wanted to have our seed. They wanted to take our **cross**. They sent their girls here to sleep with Nepali boys. They did it with the name of "**hippie**."

Unpacking this conspiracy theory is beyond me but at a minimum it suggests that sexuality, and salacious tales of sexual encounter, inspired all manner of rumors that circulated through local gossip channels.

People who grew up near Freak Street also remembered noise as a point of contention between hippies and locals. With cannabis-induced insomnia, hippies stayed up till all hours oblivious to their hosts' sleep requirements. "There'd be hundreds of them lined up from Freak Street to Ombahal," remembered one person.

They'd stay up all night chanting and the locals, especially old people, would throw water on them because they couldn't sleep. [The hippies would chant] "Hare Shiva, Shiva!" They'd keep on chanting and again they'd shout "Haaaa haaaa Hare Shiva, Shiva!" Those times are long gone. Even for us it sometimes seems like a dream.

Another recalled:

There were sooooo many **hippies** around here when I was a kid and they'd never let us sleep during the night. They disturbed us a lot by playing music long into the night and smoking *charas* and ganja on the street. We used to throw water out the windows and then slowly they'd stop making noise. But some wouldn't stop even after getting soaked!

In the context of South Asian concerns over ritual purity (and the absence of indoor plumbing), being hit with liquid coming from a window was no joke. This message seems not to have crossed the cultural divide separating sleep-deprived Nepalis from sleepless hippies.

If nothing else, hippies gave Nepalis a new perspective on foreigners. Previously foreigners had been authority figures: diplomats, development experts, wealthy older tourists. But hippies were something altogether different. One prominent Kathmandu businessman explained that

at first it was difficult for Nepali people to accept [hippies] because they are the children of the white people and yet they were dirty, ugly, without shoes. At first [Nepalis] were shocked. I mean, "What kind of people are they? It must be a joke." But slowly they talked with them, day to day, and found that, yes, these white people also make mistakes. It's not necessarily that the white people are 100 percent right. They realized that white people are not like supermen. They are like we are. They make mistakes, they do stupid things, they sometimes cheat us, they are not always rich men, sometimes they beg from you.

After writing hippies off as "parasites to the society," he concluded that they had at least demonstrated that white Westerners "were just ordinary people . . . and that, in my mind, was very good."

"A Quest for New Things"

Despite these critical views, not all memories of "the age of hippies" were negative. Many people found the young travelers intriguing, informative, and even entertaining. The first challenge was figuring out what kind of people these foreigners were. "At first," one person explained, "there was nothing like saying they're from this country or that."

We had no idea where people came from. If they were dark-skinned we'd call them *marsya*, like if they were from India. If they were *really* dark and had curly hair, people

would call them *habsi*—like people from Africa. And then all whites we used to call *bhuyu* or *khaires*. These people, we thought, came from America but in fact we didn't know.⁶

Before long, however, people had acquired a mental geography of tourists. Comparing tourists by nationality became a popular pastime, especially for those in the tourist trades. A former lodge owner recalled:

There were more Europeans than Americans and Japanese. The French were the worst. They were bad characters [*badmas*]: always fighting and getting angry. They didn't understand English and they got aggressive. They'd get mad for no reason and then scold us in their own language. . . . The best and most honest were the Swiss.

A Maruhiti restaurateur elaborated further:

These tourists are educated and literate. They think twice before starting a fight. . . . But the French are aggressive! They get very angry. They would shout and yell enough to make the house shake! Italians, though they also shout, aren't like that. The best are the Australians, then Germans, then British. Americans aren't so good; they're arrogant because of money—at least that was my experience. The Japanese aren't like that. They stay very quietly but people are afraid of them.

Understanding where tourists came from was one challenge but understanding what they were up to was another. For example, Nepalis were well aware of photography but the way tourists used cameras was mystifying.

When foreigners used to come and take pictures the people around here would say, "Look, these tourists have nothing better to do than just roam around and take as many as four pictures of meaningless things!" Then we didn't know the importance of photos. [People asked] "Why are they taking pictures? What's so amazing about this?"

Another who grew up a few blocks from Freak Street remembered:

We used to be amazed when we saw these people and the tourists were also amazed by seeing us. For example, we used to dry our rice and chilies out on the street, and

6. *Marsya* is a derogatory Newari term for dark-skinned Indic lowlanders related to the Nepali term *madhesi*. *Habsi* is the Newari equivalent of the English "negro." The Newari *bhuyu* and Nepali *khairo* both literally mean "gray" but are widely used for people identified racially as "white." Nepalis often use *khair* ("one who is gray") interchangeably with *kuire*, a derogatory term for light-skinned foreigners.

we'd make long strings of vegetables and hang them from the windows for drying. To see these things tourists used to come to our place since we lived quite near Freak Street. So we'd be washing clothes by beating on stones, or bathing children out on the street. Farmers would be coming and going. All of these things tourists were amazed at. They'd take photos of all of this.

For people who grew up near the tourist areas in the 1960s and 1970s, hippies were both a part of the landscape and a source of entertainment. Many people remembered, as children, interacting with young tourists. Music was often part of the attraction:

Hippies used to come and those with guitars used to play wherever they liked. One popular spot was on the steps of the temples by Hanuman Dhoka. They stayed there with bliss [*ananda*] not caring about anything. They just kept on playing music and as kids we used to go and watch these things.

Another person remembered how

the tourists would be out there singing “Wah, wah, wah” which we didn't understand. But people just enjoyed their **expression** even though we didn't understand the music or words. We'd watch their faces and gestures and we were attracted by this. Whatever foreigners did looked good to us since new things were more exciting than what we already had. It was the same for them. The foreigners would put on *dhaka topis* [Nepali caps] and saris even though they didn't know how to wear them. At that time, that's how it was.

Often interactions between hippies and local kids went beyond just watching. One person who grew up in the old city remembered:

When I was a kid [in the early 1970s] I used to wonder, “Who *are* all these *white, white* people?” But after a while it just seemed normal. When I was around maybe ten or twelve I used to go to Basantapur to play marbles with my friends and, let me tell you, we used to see a lot of things over there! Like, oh! What sort of clothes they used to wear! There were all kinds of different **designs**. They used to be all wrapped up in baggy clothes with long fringes hanging out. Well, we used to feel amazed. Some of them used to play marbles with us.

Others had memories of young tourists sharing things with them:

Whatever they were eating they'd share with us, even Coke which we could *never* afford. Coke was only for rich people so when these tourists gave us Coke, we were

really happy! They'd walk around and if we asked for something, they'd give it to us: food, clothes, **gifts**, whatever.

For many who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, hippies are an indelible part of pleasant childhood memories. "I mean these tourists used to do really wild [*anautho*] things! They were really entertaining. Watching them was fun for us. You know, that was a carefree time. It was fun." Many people echoed this sense of pleasure. "Hippies had such a good time enjoying themselves and we Nepalis had such a good time watching them! Some of us tried to do what the tourists did but mostly we were just spectators [*darsak*]."

If Nepali children enjoyed being around hippies, for many tourists, the feelings were mutual. In interviews and memoirs foreigners frequently mention the pleasures of interacting with Nepali youngsters. In fact, it's clear that kids—eager to please and quick to pick up foreign languages and habits—were a crucial interface between Nepali businesses and foreigners. In many family-run operations children were the front men. Pico Iyer describes the "ragamuffin charm" of the "schoolboy sages . . . who operated most of [Kathmandu's] stores and cafés" (1988:96). Homeless street children also looked to foreigners for help. Many Nepalis told stories of poor children who were either adopted or offered financial support by sympathetic tourists. More common were temporary bonds between foreigners and poor children. Slovenian Evald Flisar visited Kathmandu in 1974 and wrote a wonderful, presumably autobiographical, short story describing a young European couple's encounter with a street child who shows them around town. Taking pity, they feed and clothe him. They bathe him and let him stay in their hotel room. But as they prepare to leave the couple tries to explain that they cannot take the boy with them. Called "The Executioners," the story ends with the boy's abandonment and the couple's anguish. From their taxi they look back at the boy: "Leaning against a wall, he looked like a hostage executed by a firing squad" (Flisar 2009:30).

Young foreigners had an impact on Nepali youth in many direct and indirect ways. One man, now a successful Kathmandu artist, described his teenage years in the 1970s:

I used to hang around Freak Street because that was the only place we could hear Western music. There were a lot of restaurants and some of them had collected records and tapes from hippies and other people. Outside of Freak Street at that time there was no place to buy or hear music. . . . I mean, I heard Frank Zappa on Freak Street. Or Pink Floyd and stuff like that. Freak Street was the only place for the latest music coming from outside.

“But,” he continued, “people like me, we looked at hippies and didn’t see dharm seekers. We didn’t see revolutionaries. We looked at them and saw Levis [jeans]. We saw guitars. We saw records. And we wanted that stuff!” In other words, for most Nepali kids, hippies were not about counter-culture but about material culture. Hippies were literally the *carriers* of Western youth culture that young Nepalis identified as important parts of their own projects in constructing modern identities.

Beyond just consuming Western music, by the late 1960s Kathmandu already had an active Nepali performance scene. Some of the earliest Western pop music performers were Nepalis from Darjeeling where access to Western music and instruments long predated that in Kathmandu (Karthak 2003).⁷ Some of the first Nepali-led Kathmandu hotel bands were from Darjeeling, working first in Calcutta before coming to Kathmandu. Soon to be among Nepal’s leading recording artists, these musicians recalled how Kathmandu’s lively hippie music scene had been among the main attractions luring them to Nepal. Others in the local music scene were children of British Army Gurkha soldiers who had grown up abroad and strongly identified with an emerging global youth culture. Among them was the legendary Mansing Gurung, raised in Singapore. Even now people speak of Gurung in reverent tones as a phenomenal guitarist. “Ohhhh, he could play like Jimi Hendrix like anything,” one local musician remembered with awe. “With his teeth, behind the back, everything!”

Some members of this Nepali Western pop-music scene were Kathmandu locals, often people who had grown up around Freak Street. One, from a Newar merchant family with long-standing ties to Calcutta and abroad, described listening to the Beatles on 45 RPM records from an uncle in Hong Kong. Fascinated with guitars, he managed to buy an old instrument but struggled until one day his father hired a young American woman to teach music and guitar basics to the kids. Later she sent a guitar book from which he learned all the chords in major and minor keys. “That was a turning point for me,” he said. “It was the first contact with a Westerner I’d had.” Along with siblings and cousins he formed a rock band named the Mob, cobbling together borrowed electric guitars, drums, and amplifiers from friends and even foreign embassies. Along with covers of Western songs, the group performed their own rock and blues numbers in Nepali and even Newari.

One of the high points of the early Kathmandu pop-music scene was the “Beat Competition” concert held in Kathmandu’s City Hall in 1971.

7. Karthak adds that, because many Darjeeling Nepalis were Christians, they were also free from the caste prejudices that made many Hindu Nepalis associate musical performance with low caste standing.

Sponsored by UNESCO, the competing bands were entirely Nepali and played to a packed house. First place went to the Pakhes,⁸ a band made up of Kathmandu locals and children of Gurkha service men. Second place went to the Mascots, a Nepali band originally from Darjeeling. Performing an avant-garde solo set, Hendrix-like Mansing Gurung took third place. And fourth place went to the Mob. “We had these very jazzy ties,” said the lead singer. “And we wore suits and all that. Most of the time we tried to imitate the Beatles, bowing and all that.” A student at the time, he went on to describe how the Mob’s performance helped raise his social profile:

I had some nice girl classmates. They were smart. They’d studied in Delhi, Darjeeling. . . . But I was shy—very shy! But those girls also came to see the Beat Competition concert and they were surprised to see me up on the stage. “Wow, what a hero!” [they said]. Then suddenly we stared mixing!

It’s important not to write off the 1971 Beat Competition concert as an instance of “Western influence.” Though foreigners were sometimes helpful in facilitating access to instruments and techniques, this concert (and the surge in musical interest that led to it) is not a matter of delayed imitation of some foreign modernity. Rather, it’s a great example of a *simultaneous* Nepali modernity, of Nepal’s participation in a then-emerging global cosmopolitan culture of which 1960s youth movements were an important part. With band members drawn from families with ties to global merchant and military diasporas, Nepali participants were no less transnational than the Western hippies a Eurocentric view would claim they were imitating. The concert and its popular reception are signs of Nepal’s participation in the same modern forces (youth culture, commercialization, fashion) that through other pathways had led the hippies to Kathmandu.

Much the same could be said of local interest in tourist’s clothing. Like the man quoted above, many young Nepalis were attracted to Freak Street less for the chance to interact with foreigners than to get their hands on clothing items that were fast becoming the uniform of a global youth culture. Today urban Nepali men almost universally wear Western-style clothing. But even well into the 1970s Nepali clothing was the norm. A Basantapur area merchant described local changes in fashion:

Clothing? It’s nothing like it used to be. The tourists would exchange clothing for all kinds of things. They exchanged very good clothes, like we wear now—**shirts, pants,**

8. The Nepali word *pakhe* means something like the English words “yokel” or “hillbilly.”

coats. We didn't used to wear **shirts**, but *bhoto* and *daura*⁹ of various kinds. Hah! Now people don't even know what these things are!

Young foreign tourists looking to “go native” (and/or make some money) found eager partners in young Nepalis keen to get hold of foreign clothing, especially jeans: “Tourists came wearing **jeans** and **bell bottoms** and when they were broke, they'd sell their clothes. We used to buy clothes right off their backs and they'd wear our old-style Nepali clothes!” “There was huge demand for **jeans**,” one person remembered. “Everyone used to run after them. At that time there were Nepali clothes and a few things from India, but only rich people had clothes from outside.” “Back then we'd *die* for a pair of **jeans**,” remembered another. “But they were really expensive and most people couldn't afford them. I remember paying five or six hundred rupees¹⁰ for **Lee jeans**. I had to beg for them.”

Given that wearing foreign clothing had previously been limited to Nepali elites, for commoners wearing foreign clothes had political as well as fashion implications. One person explained that

the Ranas used to wear fancy foreign clothes but it was limited only to their circles—the people who had contacts with the British. Locals had to wear local clothing, or maybe some items from India. That's why clothing brought by the whites was in such big demand. It was a matter of prestige.

Some of the earliest adopters of foreign clothing styles were people in tourism-related businesses and students. For these people (and eventually others) wearing foreign clothes was about overtly signaling an orientation toward cosmopolitan modernity. For people denied access to the world by a century of xenophobic Rana rule, and faced with high-caste Hindu conservatism, wearing foreign clothing was a way of literally embodying modernity. Ironically foreigners and Nepalis wanted each other's clothes for related, but seemingly opposite, reasons. In Nepali dress foreigners saw a “lost” way of life, a premodern life they wished to reclaim. But for Nepalis foreign dress was a type of modern material culture to which they had long been exposed (often on the bodies of Rana elites) but were forbidden to wear (cf. Liechty 1997). The same pair of jeans meant something very different on a Nepali than on the Western tourist who'd worn them to Nepal.

Along with music and clothing, another way that tourist culture fed

9. *Bhoto* and *daura* are traditional Nepali string-tied upper garments.

10. Or fifty to sixty US dollars: a *huge* sum of money at the time, especially for Nepalis.

into local longing for access to the world was through new foods and foodways. As tourists occupied low-end local eateries, as Nepalis opened restaurants catering to budget tourists, and as tourists began teaching their hosts how to make their favorite foods, new worlds of foods and dining aesthetics opened up to Nepalis adventurous enough to try them. Prior to the budget travelers' arrival, Kathmandu's only restaurants were for foreigners (wealthy Westerners or resident Indians) or poor Nepali transients. Respectable middle- to upper-caste Nepalis—observant of strict caste-based regulations proscribing where, how, and by whom food was prepared and eaten—would not dream of risking the pollution (and community censure) that might come from eating “outside” (Liechty 2005).

But for some Nepalis, usually youth, these new restaurants offered the taste of freedom they craved. A Freak Street area lodge owner explained:

We Nepalis didn't have this habit of eating in restaurants. At that time they were mostly for tourists. But Nepalis were curious about the atmosphere and what foreigners were doing in there, what kinds of foods they were eating. They started wanting to find out. They found out all kinds of new things!

A prominent Nepali businessman who grew up in the old city during the 1960s and 1970s spoke at length about the new restaurants and their appeal:

You know I used to be one of the hippies. Well, not *hippie* hippie—but sometimes I used to go to those restaurants and hear the songs of these hippies. That was a sudden change in the life: a new kind of restaurant. I mean restaurants with dim lights, and the music going on. That was the attraction.

We wanted to enjoy the ambiance of that kind of night life, like music going till 10:00 at night. And strange kinds of food: like pancakes, pie, cake, pizza, sherbet and all these things. All those were very new so many people like us, we were very attracted. But I don't think we were attracted to the hippies. It was fashionable but it was *more* than fashion. It was looking for knowledge, a quest for new things.

He went on to reminisce about specific restaurants, always returning to the theme of ambiance:

Aunt Jane's—wasn't that beautiful, Aunt Jane's? Look at the atmosphere there. And Yin Yang, that was on Freak Street and that was fantastic. We used to gather in those small places because we were enjoying the whole ambiance. The whole atmosphere, you know, there was some kind of art. People were involved in decorating. It was beautiful. You know, we'd go to that restaurant and there was always something new

happening. Sometimes people would develop a new kind of lampshade or a new painting. There was some kind of *art* involved. Sometimes I feel that we are missing [this now].

As for so many others, for this man new foods were part of the attraction but more powerfully intriguing were the new dimensions of aestheticization introduced by young foreigners. Especially foreign-run restaurants gave Nepalis direct access to cultures of taste that completely reenvisioned the meaning and experience of mundane activities—like eating—that were embedded in a totally different semiotic universe. These lessons in “commodity aesthetics” (Haug 1987) were not lost on observant Nepalis who were quick to bring all kinds of newly aestheticized goods and services into the local market—first for tourists and soon for local Nepalis.

Restaurants had other new appeals as well. For some, restaurants offered new ways to publicly display private privilege. For young people, being seen in a restaurant was a way of acquiring status. Looking back on his experiences on Freak Street as a teenager, one man told me how

my friends and I would go there and drink a cup of tea. We’d beg ten paisa from our mother, or steal half a rupee from our father’s pocket and we’d go down there, sitting for hours for ten paisa. It was actually a fashion for youngsters then. A fashion to go into a restaurant, sit down and maybe have a cup of coffee while looking at your friends outside, showing off to them that *you* are sitting in a restaurant! It was a way of showing off.

For others restaurants were useful places to strike up conversations to practice foreign language skills. “Most people went with tourists to learn the language,” one person told me.

They’d go and have tea and coffee with people because of language. Mostly rich people, they’d go to a restaurant. They’d sit down there, make friends and talk—for language. Most people did it for language.

Restaurants were useful venues for Nepalis even if their objectives had little in common with those of the young foreigners who these establishments were mainly targeting.

For young Nepalis seriously intent on gaining access to the outside world, no hippie-era innovation had a more dramatic impact than the humble used bookstores that sprang up along Freak Street. “One interesting thing about tourists at that time,” explained one person, “is that

they also came with books, along with music. They read books and when they were done, they'd leave them. . . . In that way the most up-to-date [**latest, latest**] books and literature came with them." For students at the few English-language high schools in Kathmandu, or at nearby Tribhuvan University, these bookstores offered windows onto the world that few Nepalis had ever had access to before.¹¹ A Nepali professor spoke fondly of the Freak Street bookstores he frequented as a student in the 1970s. "Not many Nepalis, but people like me—students—if we had a little money, that's where we would go. The books were cheap. Even I could afford to buy there. I bought soooo many books." He found everything from classics like Fraser's *Golden Bough* and poetry by Walt Whitman, to contemporary poetry by Allen Ginsberg, works on Buddhism, and books on popular music. "Most of my collection of these very interesting ideas comes from those Freak Street bookshops. I still have many very precious books with the Spirit Catcher stamp in them." These bookstores not only gave young Nepalis access to the foundational texts that helped define a generation but inspired them in many of the same ways, and for the same reasons, that they had their Western counterparts.

Contacts between Nepali students and young foreigners sometimes went beyond a shared interest in books to the level of real face-to-face intellectual encounters. For several years in the early 1970s a group of intellectually oriented hippie expats held weekly discussions—open to all—in a small rented hall in the old city. Few Nepalis had both the intellectual drive *and* the English-language competency needed to wade into these often esoteric discussions but those who did were often deeply influenced and formed close relationships with the foreigners. One active Nepali participant, a student at that time, described his experiences:

Many of my [Western] friends didn't have much money but what they brought us was a sense of awareness or consciousness. Many of the things I know today I learned from interactions with them as much as I did from my university. There used to be discussions. There was a hall near Makhantole where, once a week, there used to be serious discussions of all kinds of topics: American literature, philosophy, art. There was also a lot of interaction on things like Buddhism, transmigration, the mandalic concept, nirvana—that kind of thing. These hippies with their huge beards met every week. They all looked like rishis [Vedic sages] sitting around having discussions, very beautiful discussions.

11. Nepalis had access to books and libraries before this time but not the *kinds* of books—cutting-edge and countercultural—that appeared in Freak Street's used bookshops.

Usually three or four Nepalis attended these weekly meetings, along with a larger group of foreigners often led by Ira Cohen, Michael Hollingshead, or Angus MacLise.

In fact these three formed the nucleus of a small group of Westerners interested in making links to the Nepali literary and intellectual scene (even though they never learned Nepali). Hollingshead sought out ties with the elderly aristocratic Nepali intellectual and writer Balkrishna Sama. He was so impressed with Sama's elegant home, perfect English, and blue silk suit that, he wrote, "I felt that I was in the company of an exceptional, rare person, perhaps even a saint but certainly a wizard of some sort. . . . Perhaps in him I had at last found my 'guru'" (1973:231–34). Hollingshead and other Westerners also showed up at literary soirees hosted by Parijat, the avant-garde Nepali female author (Hutt 2010:81–86). "She was the queen bee and all these people, including foreigners, used to be there," remembered one Nepali writer. Never one to shy away from publicity, Hollingshead took it upon himself to serve as a kind of cultural ambassador between hippies and Nepalis. He wrote letters to the editor "about what young Westerners were doing in Kathmandu" (Hollingshead 1973:240–44). And in 1970 Hollingshead and some other hippie intellectuals joined students from Tribhuvan University's English Department in the production of several plays including Christopher Marlow's *Doctor Faustus*. "When they were here we did some really serious things," remembered a Nepali student from that time.

One interesting example of intellectual collaboration between Nepalis and young Westerners were the literary magazines produced by expats but with the aim of bringing together Nepali and foreign voices. One of these—spearheaded by Michael Hollingshead—was *FLOW*, an "international quarterly" that managed to produce a single issue in Nepal, dated "Dashain 2027" (roughly, October 1970).¹² Designated "VOL I No. 2," the (as far as I know) last-ever issue of *FLOW* was modeled on an earlier issue published by Hollingshead in London. The masthead lists two Kathmandu editors (Kristof Jastrzebski and Lois I. Kantor), a London editor (Fiona Dougal Brown), and Hollingshead as "Interplanetary" editor. An editorial note promises that *FLOW* will concentrate on "poetry from India [*sic*] and the West, translations from Sanskrit and Tibetan sources, essays on art, literature, comparative religion, tantra philosophy and tantric art." Included in the lone Kathmandu issue are translations from Tibetan and

12. Thanks to Michael Hutt for sharing the, to my knowledge, only extant copy of Kathmandu *FLOW*.

Sanskrit religious texts, a few Western poems, works by nine Nepali poets,¹³ and a critical essay by Abhi Subedi entitled “Movements of Nepali Poetry of this Decade.” Although the magazine aimed to attract subscribers, in fact *FLOW*’s distribution was sporadic and halfhearted. Nepali contributors received copies, others trickled through the Kathmandu expat scene, and a few left with departing foreigners, but Hollingshead’s *FLOW* lacked the force to keep it from drying up.

Like *FLOW*, *Ting Pa*, Angus MacLise’s Kathmandu-produced literary magazine, also combined translations of religious texts with Western and Eastern poetry including translated works by Nepali poets such as Balkrishna Sama. Four or five issues of *Ting Pa*¹⁴ appeared by the mid-1970s¹⁵ before it too ceased publication. Even though *FLOW* and *Ting Pa* were as ephemeral and idiosyncratic as their editors, both were forums in which Nepali artists could join their Western counterparts in a shared project of avant-garde expression.

Other Nepali literary figures took note of the hippie presence in Kathmandu even if they could not, or chose not to, collaborate directly. Given that Nepali authors had been in dialogue with outside literary trends since at least the nineteenth century (Hutt 1984:128), Nepali literary engagement with Western countercultural styles, and the appearance of hippie tourists in Nepali literature in the 1960s and 1970s, is not surprising. One remarkable example of this convergence is the Ralpa group of poets, songwriters, and musicians that formed in Kathmandu in the late 1960s. “Influenced by the musical style and philosophy of artists such as the Beatles, Simon and Garfunkel, and Bob Dylan, they set out to create a body of songs that expressed their opposition to the oppressive Panchayat system” (Hutt 2010:85–86). Appropriating easy-to-transport guitars (instead of bulkier traditional instruments), Ralpa artists recast the Nepali folksong idiom into a new register of protest and activism. One famous Ralpa song (from 1969) sums up the movement’s ethos:

Our songs are the violins of the stomach of the great poet who died hungry
Our songs are the ragged clothes of the minstrel brother who died naked

13. In the order listed in the table of contents, these nine are Ishwar Vallabh, Madan Regmi, Ramesh Shrestha, Parijat, Krishna Bhakta Shrestha, Mohan Himamsu Thapa, Poshan Pandey, Ratna Thapa, and Upendra Shrestha. Some of these poems were composed in English but most were translated from Nepali.

14. According to MacLise, *Ting Pa* is the “Tibetan name for that special cloud that wraps itself around high peaks” (MacLise 2011:63).

15. The only copies of *Ting Pa* I have seen were displayed in an exhibition on the life and work of Angus MacLise at the Boo-Hooray Gallery in New York City in May 2011. Unfortunately none of them were included in the exhibition catalog (MacLise 2011).

Our songs are the voices of graves, filled in without dying, but alive
 Our songs are the sculptors cast out into the alleys, uncared for and despised. (in
 Hutt 2010:86)

Bhupi Sherchan, the influential and beloved modernist free-verse Nepali poet, both loved and was influenced by Ralpa poetry. In the late 1960s he wrote several poems that commented satirically on the hippie presence in Nepal. In a 1968 Nepali poem entitled “Evening, New Road, a Burlesque of Life” (excerpted above as this chapter’s epigraph), Sherchan notes the incongruent erotic appeal of a skimpily dressed hippie woman strolling past the poverty and dejection on Kathmandu’s New Road, just around the corner from Freak Street. In a poem written the following year Sherchan juxtaposes wealthy tourists and struggling Nepalis at the Pokhara airport:

Planes are coming, planes are going,
 Coming with honeymoon couples,
 Going carrying soldiers
 Summoned to Kutch next morning.
 Planes come, bringing tourists
 To see the Fishtail Mountain,
 Planes go carrying baskets and trunks,
 Ploughs and the Fishtail’s children
 Off to see land in the plains.
 (in Hutt 1996:56)

Tourists arriving for sightseeing and pleasure pass hard-pressed Nepalis leaving for work as mercenary soldiers, or in search of better lives and lands elsewhere.

Ratnadev Sharma’s 1971 Nepali-language poem entitled “I Too Am a Remarkable Man” also comments on an exotic hippie woman. He ridicules her clothing but also sympathetically acknowledges the tourist’s alienation from her own society and the “terrors of Science.”

How splendid you are, oh hippy,
 How fine your tiger-teeth earrings
 And the beads and red local skirt you wear.
 On a whim you have set yourself apart
 From the spinning terrors of Science,
 From the grind and squeak of its millstone;
 You have come to stretch yourself out on the laps of unworried people.

But the poem concludes with a firm insistence that exotic foreigners are not the only people worthy of honor and attention.

So turn around once and look,
 Look closely at me:
 With my right hand I lift up the sun as I walk;
 I too am a remarkable man.
 (in Hutt 1996:54)

Sharma seems to see the tourist's clumsy efforts to dress like locals as not just naive, but intrinsically patronizing. Fleeing the "grind and squeak" of the Western "millstone," in their efforts to find a premodern past the hippies reduce Nepalis to primitive caricatures. Foreigners fail to see anything but the "unworried people" they imagine to be the antithesis of their own modern selves. "Turn around once and look," Sharma commands. Give up your othering impulse and "Look closely at me." I may not have arrived from the ends of the earth but "I too am a remarkable man."

Writing in English, then-student (now professor) Abhi Subedi also wrote of his encounters with foreigners, many of whom were his close friends. One poem, entitled "A Hippie Woman," published in 1977, recounts a meeting at Bishnu's Chai and Pie in Maruhiti:

The suavity you wear
 in your mauve clothes
 is ours;
 the red beads you wear,
 the impression of your
 equipoised buttocks' and bosom's
 outlines over a sari and blouse
 are ours;
 the odds and ends you collect
 are ours.
 But the harmony and satisfaction
 you derive from
 the odd combinations
 is yours.
 (Shrestha, Subedi, and Karthak 1977:42)

Subedi probably spoke for many in concluding that, even if the visitor's strange "odds and ends" wardrobe was cobbled together from local sources, any aesthetic pleasure to be derived from the result was strictly

foreign. Like Sharma, Subedi reads the tourist's "native" attire less as a compliment or effort to conform to local cultural standards than as a foreign project carried out with little concern for local norms or sensibilities. The "harmony and satisfaction" that foreigners seek end up turning Nepal into the *mise-en-scène* of an alien drama.

Prakash A. Raj's 1978 *Nepali Hippini* (literally, "Nepali Female Hippie") describes a very low-caste young Nepali woman whom the fictionalized narrator observes in the company of long-haired Westerners in the lake-side tourist enclave near Pokhara in western Nepal. Wearing the bangles and hairstyle of a married woman, and trailing a small "white" child, the narrator initially mistakes her for an ayah or nanny. But when he sees her walking hand-in-hand with a foreigner, he begins to ask questions. A local shop keeper reports:

"She's from the Damai [an untouchable] caste. She's been hanging around with that bearded American for about a month now. Just the other day my brother saw these Americans swimming in Phewa Lake. Good Lord, what kind of people are these foreigners, swimming stark naked in the lake! That Nepali woman was also bathing naked in the lake," he said. "These days we've started to see plenty of white skinned foreigners bathing naked. Villagers around here don't even care that much. Our boys go sneaking around to get a glimpse of hippie girls bathing naked. But our Nepali girls bathing naked like this? That looks really bad," he said. "A few days ago I gave that girl a good talking to." (Raj v.s. 2035:70)¹⁶

The narrator also learns that the young woman had been living with an American Peace Corps volunteer who left her.

Living in the village this volunteer had become fluent in Nepali. I heard that these two used to chat together in Nepali. So that's how he influenced her and that's how they got mixed up together. Because she was only a Damai, people in the village didn't care that much about it. After that the volunteer brought her here to Pokhara and they lived together for about two months. I heard he used to tell her, "I'll take you with me to America." . . . But when the American volunteer went back home, he didn't send her a single letter. (Raj v.s. 2035:71)

Her reputation ruined, but having learned some English, the Nepali *hippini* is reduced to shacking up for a week or a month with whatever foreigner will support her.

Raj prefaces his story with a note on the impact of tourism: "Once Ne-

16. This passage and others below from Raj v.s. 2035 are my own translations from the Nepali.

pal's doors were opened to tourists who thought Nepal was a mysterious place, in many areas tourism has begun to bring about huge changes" (v.s. 2035:65). As such, the story reads as a cautionary tale of the dangers of foreigners and their (literally) seductive ways. Like the poems mentioned above, here also sexualized bodies are a central trope—though in Raj's story that scandalous eroticism has been transferred onto a Nepali body, albeit a low-caste one. And while the poems disparage Western practices, Raj takes the critique further, blaming Western hippies for the "huge changes"—mainly negative—that have beset Nepali society. Though the Nepali *hippini* is low-caste, the story seems to warn that, without due caution, the same could happen to even respectable people. Indeed by the time Raj wrote his story, a number of Nepalis—and even some women—had gone the hippie way.

Nepali Hippies: Fellow Travelers on a Journey of the Mind

As with Westerners, hippie-ness for Nepalis was a matter of degree. Many experimented with Western fashions, and some embraced parts of the hippie lifestyle, but relatively few had the language skills or inclination to step into the hippie world—a decision that often meant withdrawing from Nepali social circles. Looking back at their youth in the 1960s and 1970s many Nepalis remember going through a hippie phase. "You know I also was like a hippie," a Nepali businessman who had grown up near the Cabin Restaurant remarked. "I had long hair like them. I was crazy for jeans. Look at this picture—I had hair down to my shoulders. It was the Beatles era. There was a fashion to have long hair." The 1970s saw bands of young Nepali men—"New Road Cowboys"—roaming the main streets sporting long hair, bell bottoms, and (by the late 1970s) platform shoes.¹⁷

Catching the hippie "fashion wave" was easy but making meaningful contact with young foreigners was more difficult. A few used music as a bridge. Om Bikram Bista—known by some as "the father of Nepali pop music"—worked on Freak Street, learned to play guitar from tourists, and went on to make it a career. A few young Nepali men who grew up around the tourist districts and/or went to English-medium schools became comfortable enough with Western cultural norms that they formed relationships with foreign women. One sophisticated middle-aged Nepali businessman sighed nostalgically as he told me of his overland trip by motorcycle from Nepal to Europe and back in 1973 with his Danish girlfriend.

17. For more on Western fashion trends in Nepal in the 1970s, see Liechty 2003:126–30.

But very few Nepalis crossed into the insular Kathmandu hippie expat scene. These foreigners used Nepal largely as a backdrop for their own projects and fantasies—activities that had relatively little to do with Nepal or Nepalis. To break into this scene, Nepalis had to do so on *its* terms. Entering the inner circles meant more or less becoming a part of them. As one long-term expat told me, “The Nepalis that got involved with us were really hip. I mean they were intuitively hip people . . . and they managed to find a way to get in [to the scene]. Many of them became junkies in the end.”

Being hip to what foreigners thought was hip was, of course, more than just a matter of intuition. Without exposure to cosmopolitan counter-culture even the most intuitive Nepalis weren’t going to rank high on the hipness scale. Therefore, most of those who did cross the divide came to it with some degree of foreign experience. Foremost among these were children of Nepali Gurkha servicemen, people who had grown up in British Army camps abroad. One of these was Mansingh Gurung—the amazing Jimi Hendricks impersonator mentioned above. Said a friend:

He was the son of a *lahure* [Gurkha soldier]. He grew up in, um, Malaysia, Britain—I don’t know. But he learned that, how to play guitar. That’s how he learned. He was very talented. Obviously he had been training since his early youth but when he came here he met these musicians from the West. Among the hippies there were many musicians, many *good* musicians, and Mansingh met them. For a while he had a band with them. There was one guy from northern Europe and the other two were Americans.

Having been exposed to global youth trends while growing up abroad, more than a few of these young Nepalis “returned” to Nepal for the first time in the late 1960s and 1970s, attracted by precisely the same counter-cultural youth scene then luring hundreds of thousands of their Western youth counterparts to South Asia. One Kathmandu musician, himself originally from Darjeeling, looked back to the hippie era and explained how

a lot of other musicians who came then, who came for the Western music, they were British Army sons who had lived in places like Hong Kong or Malaysia. . . . These guys were attracted [to Kathmandu] because [while growing up] they saw TV, and they had radio, and obviously they were in much more exposed [to pop culture] places. Of course a lot of them had big problems too. Their fathers were ones with the strict discipline army mentality and along come their sons who want to be Beatles! *That* was the problem.

It's not surprising that these young Nepalis, raised in the mainstream of global pop culture and reacting against authoritarian parents, had a great deal in common with the Western youth flocking to Kathmandu at the same time.

One such person was George Subba. With his father serving in the British Army, Subba was raised in Malaysia and Darjeeling. He grew up surrounded by music. Both his parents played instruments and listened to a variety of recorded music including Western artists like Jim Reeves and Connie Francis. In Malaysia in the early 1960s Subba heard Chinese musicians playing Western pop numbers in hotel restaurants and began listening to the likes of Paul Anka, Elvis Presley, Cliff Richards, and Andy Williams. In the late 1960s he and several siblings formed a band called the Mascots. Their first gigs were in Calcutta hotels but in 1970, attracted by the vibrant hippie scene and the growing demand for performance acts in Nepal, the Mascots moved to Kathmandu. Soon they had several regular hotel bookings as well as Friday gigs at the US Marine Bar and Wednesdays at the USAID "American Club." With hotels looking to boost their "star" ratings by offering live Western music, and with a local musical scene virtually devoid of musicians with performance experience, there was good demand for groups like the Mascots.

Playing music by night, by day people like George Subba hung out with young foreigners. A friend recalled how

guys like Subarna, Pemba, George—they all came from Darjeeling in the late '60s and early '70s. The hippies were around and those guys came in and really lived like hippies in Freak Street. They had the long hair, they played the music, and they were just hanging out.

Subba told me that Freak Street then was like nowhere else in Asia when it came to current rock-and-roll music, much of it blaring from restaurant hi-fis. Walking down Freak Street was like listening to the most avant-garde radio station in the US. Foreigners too were eager to get to know young Nepalis like Subba who spoke great English, was an accomplished musician, and was as hip as any of them. Looking back, Subba remembers a kind of golden age:

Oh, it was very different then. At that time it was the hippie time, you know. And everyone was free. This Kathmandu was a free place! [laughter]

How so?

I mean, it was *free*. Say, for just walking with friends, or if you could play music there were no limits. It was much better then because everyone had the chance to get together. Like you and I. Let's say you know how to play guitar and I play guitar and we play music together and learn from each other: it was like that. I mean, now we don't have that kind of chance. Now if you try to hang out with the tourists the police give you trouble. Yeah, really! At that time it was free, very free. The police didn't give a damn.

George Subba settled in Kathmandu, raised a family, and became one of the city's leading session recording artists, lending his talents to many Nepali film soundtracks, advertising jingles, and popular music recordings.

Vidhea Shrestha was the closest thing to a Nepali *hippini* that I met. Born in eastern Nepal to a well-to-do family with close ties to the Kathmandu Newar community, Shrestha attended one of the top women's English medium boarding schools in Darjeeling, where she studied English literature. She enjoyed the musical training she received at school, took every chance she could to sing, and decided to become a professional singer. This, however, was too much even for her relatively progressive family. For them, a singing career was no better than one as a stripper or cabaret dancer: in a word, unthinkable. After graduation she came to Kathmandu in 1967 to join an older sister. Together they opened the first designer clothing boutique in the city, named Ravel's Hip Pocket, on a street just off of New Road. The sisters sketched designs for things like miniskirts and bell-bottoms and a skilled Indian tailor did the rest.

That was the very first [Western clothing boutique in Kathmandu] and *no* Nepalis would ever come! Now lots of Nepali women shop at boutiques but in those days, no way. We basically catered to the expat, hippie crowd. We never made heaps of money but it was enough to get by. Everything was different then.

While her older sister moved in high-class circles with elite Nepalis and expats, Vidhea was attracted to the hippie set. Through customers at her shop she got into the Freak Street scene and learned of the Bakery, the hippie-run "commune" or "ashram" near Swayambhu. Though she never actually lived there, she started spending more and more time with friends at the Bakery.

I knew a lot of people there and I was one of the few Nepalis, one of the *very few* Nepali women, that any of them knew. So I was a curiosity for them as well. You know,

I spoke better English than most of them for one thing. I smoked dope easily. I was friendly, I was curious, and I was interested.

She remembered how on one day, a Newar festival, she arrived at the Bakery dressed formally in a sari, not her usual Western attire:

So, I was dressed in a sari, wearing a bindi [decorative mark on the forehead], with long dark hair down my back. I was sitting on this tree, totally stoned, eyes closed. Then when I opened my eyes there were like twenty people just sitting around me staring up at me! I think if I'd been a little smarter I could have been some kind of *mataji* [female Hindu guru figure] or something!

For Shrestha, spending time with foreigners her age was a welcome relief from the pressures and constraints of the Kathmandu Newar community. Looking back on those years, she concluded, "For me this just opened up these doors which never would have if I'd continued living in India."

In the early 1970s Vidhea Shrestha met Ira Cohen and Petra Vogt (the eccentric poet-artist couple who were among the leaders of the hippie expat community) with whom she became close friends for most of the next decade. At times she lived with Ira and Petra and was a frequent subject of Ira's photography.¹⁸ Through them she met countless other people and participated in wide-ranging discussions on every imaginable subject. "They opened up this whole world for me," she explained. "Like with European literature, even though I had studied it. Or French literature: Rimbaud, I didn't know who Rimbaud was! So it was incredible for me, a whole new world. They let me tag along." She credited Ira and Petra with helping her figure out what to do with her life. "They helped crystallize a sense of possibilities that I could never have gotten from my own family or society."

Along with the rewards of associating with the hippie scene came the dangers, including a heroin addiction. Shrestha injected heroin for many years before finally kicking the habit. "A lot of people I knew from that time are dead. A lot died while trying to stop." She credited her own survival, at least in part, to being a "closet Hindu." "You know, the whole *jutho* [Hindu ritual purity] thing was so important to me that I would *never* share a needle. Just the *thought* of it was disgusting to me! It was a very private ritual. I had my own things." Many of her friends died of the combined effects of drug abuse and diseases like hepatitis (and, eventually,

18. Flipping through a collection of Cohen's old photo negative binders at an exhibition in New York City in May 2011, I saw numerous photos of Vidhea Shrestha.

AIDS) transmitted through shared needles. “Thank God for being a closet Hindu!”

Social ostracization was another price Vidhea Shrestha paid for her association with foreigners. “At first a lot of people in Kathmandu didn’t even know I was Nepali,” she explained.

They just thought I was one of the hippies come from somewhere or another. But once I was recognized as being from so-and-so’s family, then the problems started. I would actually have relatives—say, while walking down New Road—coming the opposite direction: they would *cross the street* so they wouldn’t have to greet me.

It wasn’t because I had done anything. It was because I was breaking the rules, the norms by which a Nepali women—a good Newari woman—was supposed to live. So the fact that, “Oh my gosh, she’s smoking dope! She’s been seen with the hippies! She’s having a drink openly!” And I was dressing in short skirts and all of that.

Reflecting on those years she explained:

When I think about it now, I think I was just examining my own boundaries. But I think it was also a sense of defiance. It was about breaking rules. I was doing what everyone else all over the world was doing. I was just a little ahead of the times for Nepal.

There is nothing inauthentic or imitative about Vidhea Shrestha’s participation in the Kathmandu hippie scene: her countercultural rebellion derives from exactly the same modern forces that also drove her Western peers to Kathmandu.

Alongside her career in international education, in 2000 Shrestha began singing in public for the first time in twenty-seven years. Fulfilling her childhood dream, she began working semiprofessionally as a jazz singer in a number of high-end Kathmandu restaurants and clubs. Backed by a trio from Darjeeling she sang standards and bluesy torch songs, her resonant, raspy voice lending character and depth to her renditions. “I don’t think of myself as a great singer but I had so much fun, and people seemed to enjoy it.” Kathmandu had finally caught up with Vidhea Shrestha. She died in 2010 after a long struggle with cancer.

I had been hearing stories about Trilochan (“Trilo”) Shrestha for months before I finally met him in 2008 at his Amrit Resort Spa and Health Center located on an island of greenery in the ocean of depressing concrete sprawl on the suburban outskirts of Kathmandu. Billed as “the first center for cleansing, detox, fasting, and life extension in Nepal” (judg-

ing by photos the “cleansing” involves colon enemas), the Amrit Resort didn’t appear to be very busy (even in peak season) and Shrestha confided that after six or seven years he was happy that the business was just breaking even. “I see this place less as a business and more like a project,” he explained. “It’s a place to hang out with my friends who come through frequently.” Plus, he saw it as a service to the twenty or so Nepalis he employs and supports.

Chain-smoking, snaggle-toothed, and pierced (heavy gold earrings had pulled open big holes in his ears), his face creased and leathery with thinning hair pulled back in a ponytail, and dressed in a flame-orange muscle shirt and hoodie, Trilo Shrestha looked every bit the part of an aging freak. As I chatted with him in his office my eyes were drawn to a large framed photo portrait that looked like it could be of an Italian fashion model—a beautiful young man dressed in Asian robes with long flowing hair and delicate, angular features. When I finally asked who was in the photo, I learned that it was Trilochan Shrestha, some forty years earlier! Despite my embarrassment, this revelation certainly confirmed stories I had heard. With brown eyes, sharp nose, and a complexion that could easily be “Mediterranean”—combined with long hair and hippie clothing—it was easy to see how young foreigners in Kathmandu could have mistaken him for one of their own. Shrestha told of how one day around 1970 he was at Swayambhu when a foreigner came up and spoke to him in Spanish. Switching to English the two quickly became good friends and later business partners on the then-emerging Freak Street.

The eldest son of a wealthy Kathmandu Newar merchant family, Trilo Shrestha grew up privileged. Despite attending the best schools, he was an indifferent student, frequently skipping classes and rarely lasting anywhere for more than a year or two. Classmates from the early 1960s remember him as something of a dandy. “He was always wearing fancy Western-style clothes,” said one. “He used to wear loafer-type shoes which we had never seen before. He was kind of a showoff.” According to Shrestha, already as a boy he loved going to Pashupatinath “to visit the *babas*” [holy men]. By the time he was a teenager he was going on his own, sitting with sadhus, and experimenting with the lifestyles that the baba/sadhu scene had to offer. He began smoking *charas* (hashish) and growing his hair like a sadhu. Interestingly, as Trilo Shrestha began dabbling in Hindu asceticism, other people his age began showing up, doing the same things. He described his amazement at suddenly encountering others with long hair, interested in religion, consciousness, and mind-altering substances, but who were foreign.

Shrestha’s interest in art stems from his experiences with hallucino-

gens. Doing mushrooms as a boy opened up his mind to artistic expression and creativity. “I was psychedelic before I knew what psychedelic was!” he said. Like so many Western youth, Shrestha was drawn to the intersection of religious experience, art, and “drugs.” When LSD arrived on the scene, he felt right at home. Shrestha began spending more and more time with young foreigners who were arriving in growing numbers through the late 1960s. Around 1970 he started hanging out at the Bakery commune near Swayambhu. Shrestha felt comfortable with psychedelic seekers like himself and began to closely identify with the hippie scene.

Now hippies have a really bad name. But people don’t know what they’re talking about. They don’t know what it was really like. Hippies were *good*, man! I mean “hippie” is supposed to be some bad word but these people were good. Like, they were artists, philosophers, writers. It was amazing! These were amazing people and they were my friends.

Shrestha spent much of the 1970s traveling the Hindu guru circuit around South Asia, along with the throngs of young Westerners doing the same thing.

In 1971 Shrestha and his friend “Spanish” Khoury opened the legendary Yin Yang Restaurant on Freak Street—one of the anchors of the then rapidly expanding budget-tourist district. Shrestha gave full vent to his artistic impulses, creating the elaborate interior design that featured multi-tiered raised platforms, carpets, drapery, lanterns, and a large sound system. Shrestha also exercised his ethical values. Inspired by his father who had opened the first orphanage in Kathmandu, Shrestha made a point of helping poor street children. He hired them to wash dishes and work in the kitchen. He had T-shirts made that helped clothe the children and advertise the restaurant. On his weekly fast day, Shrestha hosted a “beggar’s banquet” at which street kids lined up for free food. After his Spanish partner left Nepal the restaurant continued on Freak Street until the 1980s when Shrestha handed it over to his brother who opened a new Yin Yang Restaurant in Thamel (where it still thrives). Though his restaurant was a success, Shrestha’s goals were never commercial. “I’m an artist, not a businessman,” he told me. Even now his Amrit Resort business card lists him not as owner or CEO but as “Art Director.”

Recalling his life in Kathmandu during the 1960s and 1970s, Nepali academic Abhi Subedi remembers being called a “plastic hippie” or “semi-

hippie” by his Western friends. Never much attracted to the freak lifestyle Subedi was, nonetheless, powerfully drawn to the political critique, intellectual quest, and search for meaning that most hippies espoused and some resolutely pursued. As such, Subedi represents a small but important group of Nepali youth who viewed their Western counterparts not as exotic strangers or bearers of desired modern goods, but as fellow travelers on a journey of the mind.

Born in eastern Nepal, Subedi grew up tending buffaloes, dreaming of big city life, and nursing a growing political consciousness. Even as a teenager in the mid-1960s he had tuned into the global youth revolutionary vibe and dabbled in anarchist, antigovernment agitations in Dharan. “And after that I came to Kathmandu,” he said.

With that spirit, that “I don’t know what to do” questioning, that idea of finding some meaning, something new, I met the hippies, so I got the extreme! Something about the loud music and the very strong assertion of beliefs appealed to me because I was a new student at the university. It was very attractive to me.

“Another thing that was very appealing to me,” Subedi added later,

was their quest for freedom and at times also anarchy. They had a passion for freedom. I had the same concerns for which I joined them. There was one more reason which was the autocratic political system [in Nepal]. I was against it and as a way out I found my way into this hippie culture. This proved to be the best alternative possible.

Indeed, what struck Subedi in Kathmandu was the strange combination of the government’s harshly authoritarian political culture that tolerated no dissent from Nepalis, and its very liberal policy toward young foreigners, many of whom were political dissidents. Ironically, by connecting with outsiders, Subedi could join in the kind of political and intellectual debate that was largely curtailed in Nepal.

Many young men and women came from abroad and I came [to Kathmandu] at the very same time. We all came driven by a desire to seek something. People came from all over the world and we all had this searching worldview. . . . Some people called them hippies. Some called them visitors. We all came here at the same time. (in Kharel 2003)

Abhi Subedi was part of the first generation of Nepalis to grown up in post-Rana Nepal. Like his peers in the West, he was steeped in the ide-

ology of modernity and modernization implemented in Nepal through massive state and international programs to deliver “development” to the masses. Like his Western counterparts, by the mid-1960s Subedi was both captivated by modernity’s possibilities and deeply critical of its current realities. For young Nepalis who came to pursue careers and/or higher education in Kathmandu, the city represented the promise of modernity and its shortcomings. Subedi explained:

We had this influence of modernism. We were very curious about what was going on in the cities. It [modernity] is a civilization centered on cities so it raises expectations and excitement in outsiders like me. London, Berlin, Paris. . . . We who came from the villages felt that even New Road was monumental!

Everything was so modern, beyond imagination. For those of us who came there was a kind of turbulence of consciousness when we saw things here. We felt we were in a different world in New Road. It had this excitement and shock value, even if for local people it was nothing.

Other people who came from rural Nepal also experienced Kathmandu as a *mahanagar*, or great city, with its paved roads and streetlamps. (It was only later they learned that, by South Asian standards, Kathmandu was more like an overgrown village.) For the modernist poets and other artists who came from rural areas, Kathmandu was a place of wonder, a symbol of metropolitan culture and civilization.

Kathmandu was also a window onto whole new worlds of possibilities and ideas, many of which were not tolerated in Nepal. Fired by their own antiauthoritarian political leanings, Nepali students learned of similar political movements among youth in Europe, China, the US, and elsewhere. “At that time there was an upsurge [*halchal*] among the youth of the world,” Subedi recalled. News of the largely youth-led Chinese Cultural Revolution was sketchy but, after 1968, Nepali students had direct access to veterans of the Paris barricades or the Chicago riots.

We knew there was something very important going on. The Vietnam War was something we understood and opposed. We saw it as an American invasion of an Asian country. Many of the people coming from America hated the war and were frustrated so they came here. They were escaping the compulsory participation in war. Some of them detested war.

For Nepalis fed up with the repressive royalist Panchayat Democracy of the 1960s and 1970s, the influx of politically radicalized young foreigners was a breath of fresh air.

“It was an amazing time,” Subedi remembers. “They came in *vast* numbers, like a flood, wave after wave. It was so exciting! . . . So many people of *my age*, suddenly they came. In a matter of a few months, *so many* people came!” Subedi told me of his first encounter with a young foreigner:

The first hippie I met was at the British Council Library. I was reading English modern literature, things like poems by T. S. Eliot. That was a good place to read and study. And there was a hippie woman wearing amazing clothes. I mean, it wasn’t such an unusual sight; by then they were a part of Kathmandu life. But she approached me and asked what I was doing. I told her I was doing my second year in English. Well, she was brilliant. She had done her Master’s in English Literature from Cambridge! She told me she’d help me study. The librarian arranged a table and chairs for us and she taught me what I had not understood about T. S. Eliot’s literature. It was a big opportunity for me to learn.

With the ice broken, Subedi quickly sought out other intellectually oriented foreigners, especially those with a taste for literature. He met Michael Hollingshead and worked closely with him and Konstanty Glinka editing the one and only Kathmandu issue of *FLOW*, Hollingshead’s short-lived East/West literary magazine. In the early 1970s Subedi became close friends with Ira Cohen and Angus MacLise, joining them and others in discussions at the Spirit Catcher Book Shop and elsewhere. With no family or relatives in Kathmandu to keep him in line, Subedi spent as much time with foreigners as he wanted. “There was no way to stop me. I would lock the door to my [rented room] for months sometimes and I was with them.” He described the liberating sensation when around foreigners of being able to wear any old clothing, something never tolerated by status-conscious urban Nepalis who were quick to equate worthless clothing with worthless people.

By the mid- to late 1970s young foreigners who had arrived in waves began departing in waves. Remembering seeing his friend Glinka off at the old bus station, Subedi said:

When he left Nepal, along with my other friends, I felt a terrible void. I didn’t know that my heart was so much taken by them and I just cried like a baby when the bus left. I didn’t know where my heart had gone.

It’s not hard to imagine the devastating feeling of loss and isolation that Subedi and other Nepali seekers felt when their foreign friends departed. Interactions with them had opened a vastly wider world of ideas and

experiences than would otherwise have been available. But it was the foreigners—with the money and citizen rights to travel—who left Subedi and others stuck in their Third World backwaters with few political rights and few prospects for travel or career advancement.

In fact Subedi *did* go on to travel abroad, earning scholarships to study in places like Japan and England, before establishing himself as a leading writer, literary critic, and educator in Nepal. But even decades later he looks back on his contacts with hippies as among the most formative experiences in his life. Speaking of Michael Hollingshead, Subedi commented, “That intellectual quality, that great human face or impulse: that is something that I have been seeking all my life. I don’t know if I have found it but that is one man who made a great influence.” Speaking of his foreign friends more broadly, he told me:

I shaped myself through them. I saw the world through this cross-cultural dynamic. And they were the ones who, I believe for me, introduced an element of openness, of courage. I consider them a generation of great courage. Of course much scholarship came after that—Edward Said and *Orientalism*, and all that [works that discredited many of the fantasies regarding Asian life and religion that many foreigners brought with them to Nepal].

But I don’t care about that. What I see in them is the great power of humanity. I think that was very needed, very necessary, and it is still needed. It is such an important element without which you cannot establish any link, or survive. They represented that.

I still think of Angus [MacLise], this tall man, this poet of Swayambhu, who wrote *Cloud Doctrine* and embraced people exuding so much love. Maybe being influenced by them and that generation, maybe I still walk with a vision.

Looking back, what matters for Subedi was not so much the *content* of the dialogue he and other Nepalis had with foreigners but the *spirit* in which it was engaged. Intellectual fashions and passions come and go but what continues to inspire him is the courageous creativity with which his foreign friends approached life and their commitment to a vision of humanity that inspired them to reach out across the cultural divide, even if the communication was often imperfect. Not many hippies lived up to this humanist ideal, and not many Nepalis had the skills and motivations necessary to meet the foreigners beyond the halfway point, well into foreign cultural and linguistic territory. But when those exceptional individuals met, the results were transformative for people on both sides.

Conclusion

It's not coincidental that closely related forms of modernist discontent and rebellion drove both Western and Nepali countercultural youth to Kathmandu at the same time. A few of these people were able to bridge the communications gap. But many more shared in the broader critiques of modernization and its promises that characterized a global youth counterculture and simultaneously mobilized a generation of radicalized students from Tokyo to Mexico City to Paris to Chicago to Kathmandu. Similarly, among both Nepali and Western youth in Kathmandu, for every one committed intellectual, activist, or artist, there were ninety-nine others whose rebellion didn't extend far beyond wearing blue jeans, growing their hair, and smoking dope. Nepal's participation in the global trends of the "hippie age" was not derivative or imitative, but contemporaneous and active. That far more Nepalis knew of the Beatles than Westerners knew of the Nepali Ralpha poets, or that far more Westerners came to Nepal than Nepalis went to the West, is a reflection of unequal global political-economic power, not unequal participation in the processes of global modernity.

Nepal's Discovery of Tourism and the End of the Hippie Era

In retrospect, US President Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to China marks the beginning of the end of the decades-long Cold War between Western capitalist states and the great twentieth-century communist states—mainly the Soviet Union and China. But US rapprochement with China also signaled a major shift in Nepal's geopolitical location. As the US worked to change its relationship with China from enemy to trading partner, “front line” states along China's borders found themselves increasingly irrelevant to the strategic interests of the world's great powers. After 1972 Nepal saw a pronounced shift away from the Cold War-driven *bilateral aid* (direct contributions from individual foreign countries) that had been its bread and butter since the 1950s, toward *multilateral aid*—“development” funds distributed through international agencies such as the World Bank, IMF, Asian Development Bank, and others (Tiwari 1992). Nepal continued to rake in international aid but the Cold War bargaining leverage that King Mahendra had skillfully wielded since the 1950s was now gone. Nepal faced the challenge of charting a new socioeconomic course in a starkly changed global context.

By early 1972 Mahendra himself was also gone—dead of a heart attack while hunting in Nepal's Tarai in January 1972—leaving his son Birendra (1945–2001) to take the autocratic Panchayat state's helm. Educated in the West and

still in his twenties, it was Birendra (and his advisors) who had to rethink Nepal's relations with the world. With bilateral aid dwindling, Birendra sought other revenue sources and quickly focused on tourism as a means of attracting foreign currency. Whereas for Mahendra tourism had been a peripheral part of a development strategy privileging infrastructure and industry, Birendra recognized tourism's potential to anchor the national economy.

This chapter examines Nepal's shifting relationship with tourism in the early 1970s. Until then tourism had basically "happened to" Nepal, driven largely by the longings of foreigners. But under King Birendra Nepal, for the first time, attempted to actively manage and market its tourism image. This new brand aimed to attract a different kind of tourist—one less thrifty and countercultural—and promote a new kind of tourism: trekking-based "adventure tourism." Unfortunately for budget travelers and the merchants who catered to them, this meant cracking down on hippies. From 1972 onward state officials targeted hippies, already an endangered species in the West, for expulsion even as it tried to lure more clean-cut, free-spending tourists to its newly packaged mountain adventure lands.

Drug Culture and the Delegalization of Cannabis

One of Nepal's main attractions to Western youth in the 1960s and 1970s was its laid-back drug policy. For a generation intent on exploring mind-altering substances Nepal seemed a bastion of enlightenment, especially as Western states criminalized one recreational drug after another and finally declared War on Drugs. At first, Nepalis more or less tolerated the frequently stoned foreigners littering their streets. But as international condemnation grew, and their own children fell prey to hard-drug abuse, Nepali officials and elites began siding with calls for a legal ban on cannabis (and other narcotics). When Nepal's reputation as a refuge for drug-addled hippies began threatening King Birendra's new tourism agenda, the state took action and delegalized "drugs" in July 1973. Until then Nepal had been perhaps the last place on earth where cannabis was not just traded and consumed, but actually regulated by the state as a legitimate item of commerce.

Long before hippies arrived Nepalis had been using cannabis. According to anthropologist Jim Fisher, cannabis was usually associated with two groups of users: Hindu ascetics for whom intoxication was part of Shivite religious rites, and the elderly who smoked ganja for pain relief or just well-

earned relaxation. As for Nepali *abusers*, there were also *ganjaris*—people who used cannabis excessively and were seen as “slightly reprehensible, although not seriously objectionable” (Fisher 1975:251).

Interestingly, a third group I learned of was sportsmen, one of whom told me that pot smoking is “good for your health.” As young athletes, after a vigorous workout, he and his friends used ganja to whet their appetites for a big, muscle-building meal. He lovingly recalled buying an ounce at a government shop, carefully preparing a chillum and readying the coals with his buddies before drawing air into the pipe, watching it burst into flame, and then passing it around the circle. “Ahhhhh! That was the ritual. It is like a Japanese tea ceremony.” For these young men cannabis was practically a health food associated with youthful vitality and a powerful physique.

Nepal had been producing cannabis products for centuries, including for export. But it was only in the early 1960s that the Nepal government began regulating the cultivation and sale of cannabis products—not to discourage their use but to generate tax revenues (Fisher 1975:252). Anyone transacting in cannabis—growers, sellers, buyers—needed to buy state licenses and pay taxes on the trade. By 1973 thirty-some government-licensed retail shops operated in Kathmandu (Fisher 1975:253) but they accounted for only a small portion of the output of a major industry that included large-scale producers, exporters, and retailers. Cannabis was a significant agricultural commodity with many dependent on its production and sale across the country. Tourist demand for cannabis may have diverted more of Nepal’s production to Kathmandu but didn’t radically alter the long-established export trade with India (Gould 1973).

In the early 1970s anyone able to buy hashish wholesale in Nepal and then market the product in the West, stood to profit at rates of up to 40,000 percent (Tomory 1996:226, Pietri 2001). Many succumbed to the temptation. Some, like D. D. Sharma and Joseph Pietri, made fortunes but most were small-time foreign operators, mainly interested in earning enough to finance longer stays in Nepal. But growing exports only increased Western states’ pressure on Nepal to delegalize cannabis.

“What’s hilarious is that the whole time the US was pushing its anti-cannabis line, there was a huge marijuana plot growing wild in the empty lot right next to the [old] US embassy. You could have practically reached out the window and grabbed some!”

—AMERICAN EXPAT IN KATHMANDU

By 1972 Nepal was under intense pressure to take action on narcotics. Unlike earlier US narcotics policies, Richard Nixon's War on Drugs was an explicitly international campaign. Nixon transformed the old Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs into the modern Drug Enforcement Agency which was, for the first time, authorized to enforce US drug policy abroad. Nepal was not Nixon's only concern: the US was already promoting harsh antidrug laws in Turkey and Iran at the other end of the "drug trail." But Nepal's reluctance to delegalize cannabis made it an important symbolic target, especially with Kathmandu functioning as an outpost of American youth radicalism. Nixon sent Vice-President Spiro Agnew to Kathmandu in January 1970 though, apart from presenting a moon rock to Mahendra (USIS 1997:18), it's unclear what Agnew's mission was. Palace sources confirm that drug policy was high on the agenda. But rumors held that the US threatened to make financial aid contingent on delegalization (Beisler 2006:118) and that Mahendra himself was offered a whopping pay-off (Pietri 2001:24). Foreign journalists had little to say about Agnew's visit aside from that it was "mercifully short" and involved only one public gaffe, when Agnew referred to Nepal as part of India (McDonald 2005:108). On the other hand, Western hippies claim that "riots broke out" over Agnew's visit (Marnham 1971:243) and that, while Agnew's entourage was sauntering through Basantapur, the VP noticed D. D. Sharma's prominent hashish showroom and took the occasion to publically berate his Nepali hosts (Beisler 2006:118). Pressure continued to mount through 1972 (following Mahendra's death) when the United Nations' International Narcotics Control Board condemned Nepal for refusing to delegalize pot (Fisher 1975:254).

How did Nepal respond to this growing pressure? Sources close to the new king report that Birendra—like his father—was not eager to bow to US pressure. Nepal's foreign policy had long been to play foreign powers off one another and discourage the perception that it was beholden to any one. According to one of his aides, Birendra was leaning toward delegalization by the time his father died, but was in no hurry to do so and was indeed conflicted. From one perspective it was clear that stopping cannabis production would have serious financial implications for western Nepal where the plant was an important cash crop. Birendra wanted the US and UN to launch large-scale crop substitution programs but had little hope of finding an alternative as profitable as hashish. One UN official promised to provide Nepal's farmers with "a crop that will be equally as lucrative as the drug he was producing." But when pressed by a reporter to explain what that crop might be, he stammered, "Well, something like, . . . something like tobacco, for example" (Gould 1973). In fact nothing could replace the

earning power of cannabis in the dry soils of western Nepal: driving its production underground only further impoverished the region.¹

Birendra was no doubt aware that the royal family itself stood to lose money from “drug suppression.” For decades Kathmandu has been rife with rumors, not unfounded, of royal family involvement in the drug trade. International monitoring groups like the Geopolitical Drug Watch (GDW) have long speculated about the royal family’s role in channeling the “ocean of cannabis” (GDW 1996:132) that has flowed out of Nepal since the 1960s. Most often cited is Prince Himalaya, Birendra’s brother and owner of the Soaltee Hotel and Casino, the later widely suspected of being a money-laundering front for drug and gold smugglers (GDW 1996:133). GDW also cites the “astonishing number” of international banks with offices in Kathmandu “given that Nepal’s financial market is quite small (1996:133), implying that an illicit, drug-based economy keeps these banks prosperous. Birendra knew that banning cannabis would be bad for everyone: from poor farmers in Rolpa, to mid-level traders, to the power elite in Kathmandu.

But Birendra also had to acknowledge growing public pressure from Nepalis to delegalize cannabis. The more or less tolerant attitude toward hippie pot users increasingly turned to condemnation as middle-class Nepali youth began emulating their foreign peers, turning not just to ganja, but to drugs like heroin.

King Birendra was ambivalent. On the one hand, he could relate personally to these young foreigners. In 1972 Birendra himself was only twenty-seven years old. What’s more, he had spent the turbulent year of 1968 at Harvard, witnessing firsthand the euphoric rise of youthful political optimism, and its utter annihilation in a hail of assassinations, student massacres, and police brutality. Birendra’s tutor at Harvard describes him as a “half-hearted 1960s hippie” who came to class dressed in blue jeans and string-tied Nepali shirt (Hutchins 2007:13). By the early 1970s Birendra was sporting his trademark Fu Manchu mustache. On the topic of pot-smoking hippies, a former palace official told me that Birendra “didn’t have any strong views on this. . . . I think [Birendra] felt that these people needed some freedoms. And if these people feel free here in Kathmandu, what’s wrong with that?”

But Birendra drew the line at heroin. Contrary to the stories told by disgruntled hippies then and now, delegalizing cannabis did not *cause*

1. Nepal’s main cannabis-producing districts were Rolpa and Rukkum. Some have argued that cannabis suppression, and subsequent economic hardships, ultimately made these regions more susceptible to leftist radicalization (Adams 2001). During Nepal’s Civil War (1996–2006) Rolpa and Rukkum formed the heartland of the Maoist antigovernment movement.

Nepal's "hard drug" problems.² The move may have worsened things, but it's also clear that heroin abuse was already common on Kathmandu's streets by the late 1960s. Most Western youth weren't interested in hard drugs. But a sizable number of early travelers on the "drug trail" were junkies in search of cheap opiates—like the morphine known as "liquid heroin" available in Kathmandu clinics. One source describes a Dr. Pradhan in Bhotahity who had an "inexhaustible" supply of medical-grade heroin and cocaine from a British pharmaceutical company which he sold for twelve rupees (around a dollar) a shot. Foreigners lined up outside his door for their daily fix (Marnham 1971:235–36, cf. Tomory 1996:136). Others remember similar lines outside New Road pharmacies. Nepalis and foreigners remember American soldiers, on R&R or demobilized from Vietnam, who arrived with heroin addictions and helped establish supply lines from Southeast Asian producers.

Although hard-drug users were never a big part of the Kathmandu hippie scene, they were often highly visible. Many remember the "really sad cases" of people who, out of money, were reduced to begging in the streets, trying to earn money as farm hands, or prostituting themselves. Others describe the "nightmare situation" at local hospitals where unprepared personnel tried to cope with addicts in the throes of withdrawal. Still others describe seeing corpses—hippies dead of drug overdoses—on the Swayambhu hill. In 1972 a Christian youth organization opened Dilaram House in Kathmandu, a mission aimed at helping addicts who had hit rock bottom (*Time* 1973). Some they nursed back to health. Others were dead when Dilaram volunteers found them. Some had sold everything, including passports, making the bodies difficult to identify. "For years [Dilaram people] helped consulates identify druggies who had been wiped out by drugs and disease," a former US embassy worker told me. Nepali lodge owners tell their own stories of dead hippies and anguished foreign parents searching for drug-addicted children some of whom, once located, refused to leave (Marnham 1971:234–35).

One long-term expat described an American heroin addict who, in the mid-1970s, was "so wasted that she resorted to begging from Nepalis and would wander around Swayambhu stoned and naked." Finally a Nepali couple who ran a tea shop near Swayambhu took pity, wrapped her in a blanket, and cared for her in their home for months. The woman detoxed enough to return to the States for rehabilitation and, eventually, a successful life and career. Years later the former junkie contacted her American

2. This argument contends that delegalization encouraged a shift from bulky, low-profit cannabis products toward low-volume, high-potency commodities—"hard drugs" like opium and heroin.

friend still living in Kathmandu and asked that her gratitude be shared with her Nepali benefactors. At first the Nepali couple refused to believe that the woman could be alive, then listened to her story with tears running down their cheeks. Hard drugs seem to have brought out the worst, and occasionally the best, in both foreigners and Nepalis.

Beyond locally available pharmaceuticals, the first hard drugs were brought into Kathmandu by Western junkies, but Nepalis quickly stepped into the trade. Western demand likely inspired Nepal's enterprising Manangi community to use their long-established Southeast Asian trade networks to import Burmese heroin in the early 1970s (Pietri 2001:29).³ But when the sons and daughters of middle-class Nepalis started falling to heroin addiction, something had to be done. It was easy to blame "hippie drug culture" for such problems and local pressure mounted for the government to take action.

Birendra assumed power at a critical time (upon his father's death in January 1972). The Cold War had been good for Nepal but by 1971 "ping-pong diplomacy" signaled a thaw between China and the US and Nixon's 1972 visit to China meant that Nepal's place next to "China's Tibet" lost much of its political significance. When the CIA pulled the plug on its anti-Chinese insurgency in Tibet in 1972 (Schell 2000:63, Rogers 2004:98), Birendra realized that the Cold War-driven bilateral aid dynamics that had bankrolled the Nepali state since the 1950s were winding down and Nepal needed some other way of tapping into the global economy.

Tourism, Birendra concluded, was one of the keys to Nepal's future. Even well before Mahendra's death it was becoming clear that tourism was an industry in itself. The late 1960s saw huge annual increases in tourist arrivals and huge gains in foreign currency earnings. The World Bank too was pressuring Nepal to "promote tourism as a source of foreign exchange earnings to improve the country's balance of payments for international trade" (Rogers 2004:97-98). In 1971 the Nepal government authorized a German consultancy to prepare a new Tourism Master Plan which Birendra read "with great interest" (according to an aide) upon its release in 1972.

The plan advocated an aggressive new approach toward tourism, one that would rebrand Nepal as an "adventure tourism" destination with "trekking" as the centerpiece of a strategy to get tourists to stay longer and spend more money. Birendra embraced the plan and almost overnight the Nepal government energetically encouraged everything from building re-

3. Wim van Spengen (1987, 2000) offers detailed insights into Nepal's Manangi trading community, their ties to the Nepal royal family, and the growth of Manangi-controlled trade (legal and illegal) between Nepal and East and Southeast Asia.

mote airstrips and printing promotional literature, to establishing a tourism management training center and the first national parks.⁴ According to an aide, Birendra placed tourism among his top priorities: “He felt his country was *just waiting* for tourists to take advantage.” Sensing a global shift toward ecology and conservation, Birendra pitched Nepal as perhaps the world’s first ecotourism destination (Croes 2006).

This eco-chic branding didn’t sit well with Nepal’s reputation as a global hippie playground. By the early 1970s US narcotics agents in Kathmandu were paying local merchants for leads on American citizens who purchased hashish (Gould 1973). They could not arrest Americans in Nepal for cannabis possession but they could nail them when they returned home.

With US agents roaming its streets, and global public opinion turning against youth radicalism, by 1973 Nepal found itself with an embarrassing “image” problem. No matter how sympathetic Birendra was to freedom-seeking pot smokers, he could not just watch as global media increasingly portrayed Nepal as a refuge for drug deviance. An official close to Birendra told me that sometime in 1972 the London *Sunday Times* published an article highly critical of Kathmandu’s hippie drug culture.⁵ The king and his advisors felt the portrayal was unfair but they could see the writing on the wall. This official told me, “I think if the [hippie] drug subculture hadn’t . . . been given the prominence that it had in the Western media, then I think, from the Nepali side, [delegalization] wouldn’t have come at that time.”

Thus, along with all the political pressure, what finally tipped Birendra toward delegalization was negative publicity in “Western media” that threatened to doom his efforts to rebrand Nepal’s tourism. Ultimately Birendra was more worried about compromising Nepal’s tourism potential than he was about pressure from the US, the UN, or other Nepalis. In the new world of image control, bad press trumped political pressure and economic uncertainties regarding the loss of an important cash crop in western Nepal.

The Nepal government first voiced its intentions to delegalize cannabis in December 1972 and in February 1973 for the first time sent a representative to meetings of the UN’s Narcotics Drugs Commission (Gould 1973). Finally, on July 2, 1973, Prime Minister Kirti Nidhi Bista announced the government’s decision to ban drugs “because of the harmful influence of narcotic drugs on the younger generation and in recognition of interna-

4. A number of works chart this shift in state priorities toward tourism promotion in the early 1970s. See Satyal 1999 and 2000; M. B. Shrestha 2000; Chand 2000.

5. I have been unable to find this article.

tional responsibilities" (*Times of London* 1973). The *Times of London* noted that "Nepal is the only country in the world which allows the unrestricted sale of hashish, ganja, and other narcotics and it has been attracting many hippies from many countries, especially America." It also reported that "Mr. Bista denied that Nepal was acting under pressure from outside but it is generally believed that the United States has asked for the cultivation of these drugs to stop" (*ibid.*). Two weeks later, on July 16, the government revoked all cannabis-trade licenses and closed down Kathmandu's cannabis retail outlets.

The following day a huge fire broke out in Singha Durbar—the massive former Rana palace turned central government secretariat—that burned for three days and destroyed half the structure (Doig 1994:41). Witnesses attributed the fire to "divine retribution" (Fisher 1975:254). One foreigner, then living in Bodhanath, remembers drifting bits of charred paper littering the countryside far and wide, and how for an entire day three huge columns of smoke rose from the fire, like the three ashen stripes on Shiva's forehead.⁶ "Shiva doesn't like it,' everyone said. Even my Buddhist friends said it. 'See that? Shiva doesn't like that idea.'"

Nepal's official delegalization of "dangerous drugs" in 1973 had less impact on the narcotics trade and drug culture in Kathmandu than intended. Because the law banned the *trade* in cannabis (producing, buying, and selling) but not *possession or use* (Fisher 1975:253), the effect was mainly to drive the trade underground. Overnight Kathmandu's dozens of hashish establishments were shut down with some reopening as handicraft shops or restaurants. But almost as fast as shops closed, the narcotics trade reappeared in the form of a small army of peddlers—often poor street children working on commission from established (now illegal) dealers—who roamed the streets whispering offers of hashish and ganja to foreigners. Even before the official decree was passed, the Golden Pagoda Hashish Shop's owner told a foreign journalist that if a ban was instituted, "We'll just have to take down our signs. But business will continue as usual. You can count on that" (Gould 1973).

What had been a relatively orderly business with prices fixed by the government quickly became chaotic, competitive, and violent as different dealers tried to capture market share. Although some remember prices going up after 1973, others say that pot prices actually went down as a result of deregulated trade. One person said that, by the mid-1970s, savvy travelers took advantage of the competition to get their dope for free:

6. The Hindu god Shiva and his related ascetic orders are closely associated with cannabis use.

A hundred times a day some kid would ask, “You wanna buy dope? Change money?” And if you turned around and said, “Yeah, I want to buy some dope but give me a sample, I want to try it,” the guy would give you a piece [of hashish] the size of your thumb! You didn’t even *have* to buy. And a week later when that was done, you’d do the same thing with the next guy.

With games like these going on, it’s not surprising that numerous people reported increased conflicts and even fights between foreigners and Nepalis around Freak Street, usually in the back alleys where drug transactions now took place. Overall the delegalized but ongoing drug trade helped to transform Freak Street into an increasingly uncomfortable and vaguely threatening area.

As Kathmandu’s biggest cannabis merchant, D. D. Sharma was not going to give in to delegalization without a fight. On the one hand Sharma acted the model citizen, contributing to local charities and even to the central government to help pay for damages after the huge Singha Durbar fire. But on the other hand he continued his cannabis business with more or less impunity. For several years Sharma sold cannabis from the premises of the former Eden Hashish Centre after painting the showroom walls black as an act of protest signifying that his business was now operating “in black” [*blackma*] or on the black market.⁷

Sharma’s ongoing business was well-known to authorities who were willing to turn a blind eye in return for bribes. The story circulating among Freak Street area merchants holds that these bribes went on for several years until Sharma finally snapped. According to one version, officials kept raising their demands for bribes. Another variant claims the police refused to drop an unrelated lawsuit against Sharma without another massive bribe. In either case, the story contends that Sharma’s response was to confront the police officer bearing requests with a pistol, promising that he would get a bullet before he got a bribe. This proved too much even for the police. With new charges brought against him, Sharma fled the country, never to return. Nepali friends still visit him in Delhi and family members continue to run his Eden Hotel (near Freak Street) and other businesses. How much “black business” Sharma is still up to is anybody’s guess.

For foreigners using cannabis (and other narcotics), the 1973 trade ban had little impact. With possession and use still legal, people were free to do what they wanted, as long as they didn’t try taking drugs out of the

7. In 2008 the walls of the Cosmopolitan Café, the business then occupying the prime space overlooking Basantapur Square that was once the Eden Hashish Centre, were still black.

country. Police made halfhearted efforts to stop pot smoking in tourist establishments but with little success. Ram Prasad Manandhar, owner of the long-lived Snowman Restaurant in Freak Street, said police used to come by and say, “‘What’s this? Why are you allowing people to smoke here?’ And I’d say, ‘You tell them yourself! They won’t listen to me.’”

For Nepalis delegalization had the effect of further stigmatizing hippies in the court of public opinion. Nepalis understood (correctly) that the ban was the result of foreign pressure aimed at curbing what were now seen as the degenerate excesses of Western youth. One person explained:

Once [delegalization] occurred, once it came out in the press, people started looking at these hippies with different eyes. It was a big change. They had been more or less invisible earlier. But then everybody suddenly saw them and called them pests. [The law] had a big influence on negative public opinion. Suddenly people began saying, “Hippies are bad because they smoke ganja!”

In short, the 1973 ban helped turn Nepalis against the kind of countercultural foreigners that had made Kathmandu their mecca for most of the past decade. With world politics shifting to the right in the 1970s, the leftist counterculture began to look less like youthful idealism and more like antisocial egotism or even dangerous rebellion. Nepal’s 1973 delegalization of cannabis allowed many in Kathmandu to jump onto the conservative moral bandwagon then circling the globe.

Visa Problems: “It Just Takes Enough Elephants”

Since King Mahendra authorized the first tourist visas in 1955, Nepali officials have struggled to craft a balanced visa policy. Making the visa period too short, too costly, or visas too difficult to renew might discourage tourists from staying longer and spending more money. But making the visa period too long encourages low-budget types to linger during which time, Nepali officials surmise, they’re probably up to no good. In the 1970s many young budget travelers were eager to spend as much time in Nepal as possible and, even as visa policy changed, they figured out ways to work the system. But as Nepal increasingly committed itself to the new non-hippie, adventure-tourism brand, visa policy became one of the state’s main tools for evicting unwanted foreigners.

The earliest tourist visas were good for one week but could be extended—though doing so required enduring days of bureaucratic rigmarole. By the mid-1960s Kathmandu’s better hotels had special employees who would

walk papers through this bureaucratic maze (Simpson 1976 [1967]:82). Visa extensions were not a big concern for most visitors during the 1950s and early 1960s who came on short-term package tours. But for many of the young budget travelers arriving in droves from the mid-1960s onward, Nepal was not a brief stop on a longer tour, but a long-sought, hard-won destination at the end of the hippie trail.

By the late 1960s the tourist visa period had doubled to two weeks with extensions available but contingent on applying (and paying) for trekking permits. Many, including hippies, went trekking but others simply applied for the longest trekking permit they could get and then skipped the trek (Tomory 1996:190). After 1973, when Nepal threw its promotional weight behind trekking tourism, it again doubled the tourist visa period (to one month) and allowed for a one-month extension, figuring that two months was plenty long for a trek. (Actual mountaineers had their own separate visa and permit process [Ortner 1999].) Through these changes, Nepali officials aimed to discourage hippie riffraff from collecting in Kathmandu.

Foreigners wanting to stay in Nepal found ways of getting around visa restrictions. Many just stayed on past the expiration date. Living at the Bakery commune near Swayambhu in 1969, one person remembered how “the visa police would raid frequently, dragging off all those whose time was up” (Tomory 1996:99). Deportation usually meant being thrown on a truck and booted across the Indian border at Bhirgunj. Many simply caught the next bus or truck back to Kathmandu armed with a fresh visa acquired at the border. Others established an annual round of spending the cool season on Goa’s sunny beaches and the warm season in temperate Nepal. After 1973, new rules stipulated that one had to remain outside Nepal for several months before applying for reentry.

Those not willing to risk the indignity and inconvenience of being deported found other means of extending their stay. Many resorted to what Terry Tarnoff called “bribery in low places,” finding that a few well-directed rupees did wonders (2005:334). In fact the key to long-term residence for many hippies was an intimate relationship with an immigration officer. By the early 1970s the bribery procedure had become streamlined. One Kathmandu expat described encountering Tent Tom—an American draft resister who had married a Tibetan woman and started a tent-making, and later carpet-export, business:

I was being thrown out of the country at the time so I kept having to go to the Home Ministry and I kept running into him. Every time I’d see him go in [to the office] and then come out smiling. He’d go in with a big stack of passports and come out smiling [with new visas]. I said, “How the hell did you get those things?” He just smiled

and pulled a bunch of thousand rupee notes out of his pocket. He said, "It just takes enough elephants!" [an elephant appears on the thousand rupee note].

Along with enough elephants, it helped if the person requesting the visa extension had some quasi-legitimate reason for staying in Nepal—a business, religious study, an artistic endeavor. Dressing the part also helped, which meant shedding one's hippie attire and arriving at the ministry properly "suited and booted."

Many young foreigners managed to extend their stays but eventually the "visa police" had their way. After months and even years of scheming, reentry, and bribery, just about everyone got the message that while visitors were welcome, residents were not. People who managed to stay long-term were those who got "real jobs"—jobs with diplomatic or international entities that provided officially sponsored resident visas. In fact it was this surrender to the world of salaries, families, and property that ultimately marked the end of the hippie era. Anti-hippie policies—in Nepal or elsewhere—made things uncomfortable for countercultural youth but ultimately it was a global shift in youth culture that put an end to hippies. Young people kept coming to Nepal in ever-increasing numbers but they were no longer interested in the hippie ethos.

Rebranding Nepal: "Our Commodity"

Prior to the early 1970s Nepal's official stance toward tourism was basically benign neglect (Satyal 1999:107). Like an act of nature, tourism seemed to ebb and flow into Nepal driven by unseen, unknown forces. Private interests (including the royal family) were the main instigators behind tourism development while the state did little more than operate a tour-guide service (Satyal 2000:209) and print the occasional tourist pamphlet. But even official guidebooks suggested that Nepali bureaucrats didn't grasp what tourism was all about. In 1965 Irish travel writer Dervla Murphy found an "endearingly" naive passage in a government tourism pamphlet which read: "The fascination of Biratnagar [a bleak industrial town along the Indian border] lies in its picturesque spots and industrial areas. Biratnagar has some of the largest industrial undertakings in Nepal." "Somehow," remarks Murphy, "it is difficult to believe that those travelers who are fascinated by 'industrial undertakings' would ever go to Nepal to gratify this particular passion" (Murphy 1967:2).

What Nepal meant to tourists was still a mystery but, by the mid-1960s, tourism's meaning for Nepal was becoming clearer: money. By then a

group of powerful Nepalis, including members of the Rana and royal families, were investing in high-end tourism. Five-star hotels like the Soaltee and the Annapurna made good money and it appeared that, with enough government support, much more growth was possible. Between 1966 and 1970 the number of tourists visiting Nepal grew by an average of almost 40 percent per year (Tuladhar 1971:6).

Estimates for tourism's earnings in 1970 range from around two million (Satyal 2000:55) to fifty million US dollars (Gordon 1979 [1972]:53). (The discrepancy between these figures may reflect the gap between foreign currency changed through official government channels and on the black market.) Under pressure from Kathmandu business interests, Nepal's official fourth "Five Year Plan" (1971–1975) made tourism a national priority (Satyal 1999:107).

The Plan called for a high-level Tourism Development Committee which King Mahendra appointed in 1971, with Crown Prince Birendra as its chair (Bhandari and Bhandari 2012:242). After hiring a German consulting firm to make recommendations for tourism development, one of the committee's first actions was to sponsor a "Symposium on Tourism in Nepal" at which industry leaders laid out a new vision for tourism. In the opening speech Tirta Raj Tuladhar, director of the Department of Tourism, cited tourism as the international economy's leading growth sector in the previous decade, concluding that "in its capacity to generate and accelerate investment employment opportunities, no other single human activity can even remotely mirror international tourism." He promised that "tourism holds the key to the many splendored future of Nepal" (Tuladhar 1971:4, 11).

Certainly the most telling remarks at the Symposium came from Prabhakar Rana, executive director (and co-owner with Prince Himalaya) of the five-star Soaltee Hotel, president of the Hotel Association of Nepal, and member of the new Tourism Development Committee. Rana too cited the tourism industry's phenomenal foreign currency earning potential, adding that it also promised to be Nepal's leading employer (Rana 1971:18). But most importantly Rana signaled a dawning recognition of Nepal's place in a world of competing tourist places: "Nepal is very fortunate. It is a much greater tourism destination than we Nepalese will understand or admit" (1971:19). For the first time we see a Nepali business leader grasping what Nepal meant in the eyes of foreigners: not a poor landlocked backwater (the image in most Nepali elites' minds), but a land of beauty, mystery, adventure, and exotic culture. This consciousness was an absolute prerequisite for any effort by Nepalis to manage their country's image and take control of their own tourism destiny.

Rana goes on to explain that, fortunately, Nepal already exists as a destination. The mountains, temples, and culture that Nepalis take for granted and that tourists are eager to spend money to experience—all are there for the taking. What tourism promoters need to do is harness these resources and turn them into moneymakers. Like a general rallying his troops, Rana told his colleagues:

The destination is already there. It is up to us to improve our commodity by building the infrastructure and not hesitate in selling it vigorously to the outside world. . . . [Nepalis must] take whatever steps might be necessary to improve our product; to constantly improve our product; that is NEPAL [*sic*]. (Rana 1971:21–22)

For the first time Nepal had become “our commodity,” a “product” to be vigorously sold and constantly improved. Rana’s speech marks a radically new objectified understanding of Nepal tourism. As he notes, Nepal had long been a destination even if Nepalis didn’t understand the place that tourists imagined Nepal to be. It is only when Nepalis began to recognize the tourism “products” that were hiding in plain sight (mountains, temples, culture) that they could begin to intentionally sell them.

For the wealthy travelers who made up the bulk of Nepal’s tourists prior to the late 1960s, Nepal was a secondary destination, typically a side trip added to an organized tour of India (itself often part of round-the-world tour packages). Even Nepali travel agencies were essentially appendages of Indian firms. Lacking direct connections to the global telex tourism reservation system, Nepali travel agents had to rely on Indian companies for bookings (Rana 1971:20). Completed in 1972, the German “Tourism Master Plan” noted this deficiency, but argued that unless Nepal could establish itself as a stand-alone, primary destination, it would always be a sideshow to India’s circus.

The German plan’s answer to establishing Nepal as an independent market was adventure tourism broadly and trekking in particular. “The long stay required for a normal trek makes a visit to India or other main attractions in the south of Asia quite subsidiary, so that . . . direct booking with Nepalese tour operators could be made” (in Satyal 1999:87). The plan also recommended that Nepal promote its natural and cultural resources. Trekking routes should be advertised and improved but so too should wildlife areas like Chitwan, and cultural sites like Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha, in Nepal’s Tarai. Trekking should be part of a package that would lure tourists to Nepal for a long stay that might include walking in the mountains, watching cultural festivals in Kathmandu, tracking wild animals in the Tarai, visiting monasteries, white-water rafting, and

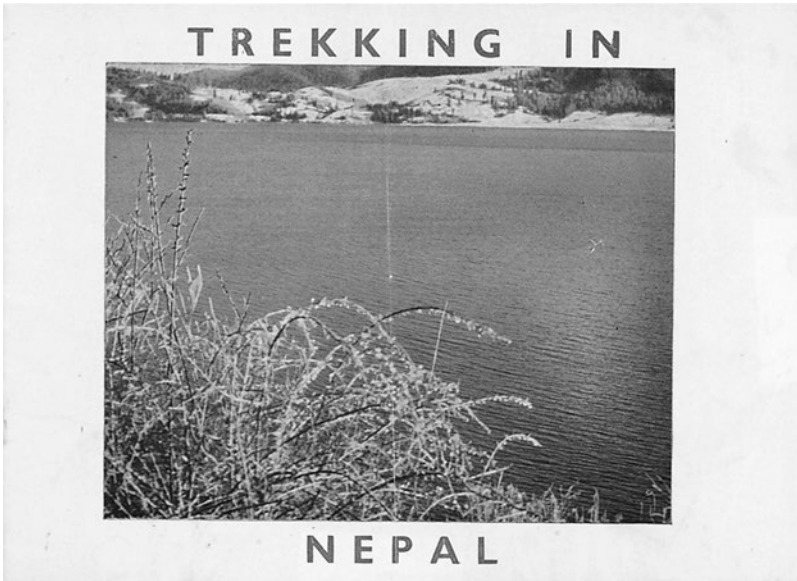
other activities. The key was to rebrand Nepal as an exciting and exotic adventure destination and then turn those adventures into products sold by *Nepali* businesses.

The result was a flurry of tourism development initiatives. In 1973 Parliament passed the “National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act” establishing Chitwan (the former big-game hunting area and location of John Coapman’s Tiger Tops luxury lodge) as Nepal’s first national park. Shortly thereafter the state created other parks in the Langtang, Khumbu, Annapurna, and Dhaulagiri regions (Satyal 2000:213, 249). Notably the motive force behind these new parks was less conservation, per se, than the need to create protected areas for adventure tourism. The parks were to be habitats for tourists with the conservation of flora and fauna subsidiary to that end.

In Kathmandu the new emphasis on tourism triggered a major surge in hotel construction (Satyal 1999:63–64). With help from the United Nations, Nepal opened the “Hotel Management and Tourism Training Center” in Kathmandu in 1972. International Labor Organization experts helped train Nepali instructors and the first students graduated in 1973 (Satyal 2000:270).

Starting in March 1972, the Department of Tourism began issuing new brochures and pamphlets at an unprecedented rate, focusing first on guides to each of the three main cities of the Kathmandu Valley. In April 1973 the department produced *Trekking in Nepal* to promote mountain tourism in precisely the areas then being established as national parks. That same year the government also produced a French-language guide (*Le Nepal*), a booklet on the Lumbini area (Buddha’s birthplace), and another entitled *Nepal: Festivals*. For the first time Kathmandu’s annual cycle of folksy processions and festival days were marketed as “culture” and sold as tourist products. Often rough-and-tumble street events associated with revelry and alcohol, festivals that had been sources of minor embarrassment for Kathmandu elites were now attractions. Tourism-driven cultural commodification continued through the 1970s in efforts to preserve historically significant monuments in the Kathmandu Valley culminating in 1978 when the World Heritage Convention recognized seven World Heritage Monument Zones—areas of exceptional architectural and historical significance placed under protective auspices—in the Kathmandu Valley.⁸ Following Prabhakar Rana’s advice, Nepalis did everything in their power to “improve their product” and then “sell it vigorously to the outside world.”

8. These seven locations are the Durbar Squares of Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhatapur, plus Swayambhu, Bodhanath, Pashupatinath, and Changu Narayan.



17 Trekking in Nepal brochure, 1973.

The last crucial element needed to fully exploit Nepal's tourism potential was transportation. For Nepal to attract the kind of tourist it now wanted—people *with* money but *without* limitless time (unlike hippies)—they needed an efficient means of getting to and from Nepal. This meant upgrading commercial air service linking Nepal with Europe and major Asian hubs. In 1971 Nepal authorized foreign carriers to bring tourist charter flights into Kathmandu (Satyal 2000:153). In 1972 Royal Nepal Airlines Corporation (RNAC), the national carrier, acquired its first jet aircraft and began direct service to Kathmandu from Delhi and, more importantly, several major East and Southeast Asian cities (M. B. Shrestha 2000:45). At the same time RNAC launched its first regularly scheduled domestic air service to the country's main trekking regions starting with Lukla (on the approach to Everest) in September 1971 (M. B. Shrestha 2000:50).

Luckily Nepal's push to improve tourist access coincided with fundamental changes in global aviation. In February 1971 Boeing rolled out its new 747 aircraft. With a seating capacity more than four times that of the 737, and a maximum range of 6,300 nautical miles (more than triple the 737), the 747 transformed global tourist travel (M. B. Shrestha 2000:34). With the 747 Boeing both acknowledged tourism's growing dominance in the global air travel market and made their bid to further promote it. By offering more long-distance, nonstop flights, 747s decreased both ticket

prices and travel times. The Kathmandu Valley is too constricted to allow 747s to land but Nepal benefitted nonetheless. Nepal's tourism rates soared by the mid-1970s as 747s brought droves of tourists to major hubs in Europe and Asia which had direct flights to Nepal.

To round out its new national tourism-promotion policy, the Nepal government also instituted a host of new (or increased) tourism-related fees and taxes in the early 1970s. Visa and trekking-permit fees increased. New laws authorized a tax on airports and hotels. The new national parks had substantial entrance fees and the cost of mountain-climbing permits increased. RNAC also initiated a two-track fee schedule whereby foreigners paid double to triple what Nepalis paid for domestic flights (Rogers 2007:44). Under Birendra's watch the government aimed to draw ever more tourists and systematically extract money from them on every step of their journey.

The End of the Hippie Era

The 1973 cannabis ban certainly doesn't mark the end of the hippie era. If anything, Freak Street continued to flourish and even grow through the mid-1970s. But the government's increasingly overt commercialization of tourism made Nepal gradually less hospitable to the countercultural ethos of the 1960s. The counterculture still flocked to Nepal, with Freak Street merchants still eager to sell whatever services young tourists were willing to buy, but from 1973 onward the writing was on the wall and it said, with growing clarity, Hippie Go Home.

In fact it was a broad shift in global youth culture, not government policy, which finally ended hippie tourism. When I asked what had happened, one long-term Kathmandu expat replied:

Well, after a while there just weren't any more hippies. I mean in the world, not just here. The whole "alternative lifestyle" or whatever you want to call it—it was just over. At a certain point that whole system just disappeared. And the country [Nepal] tightened up itself. From being this really laid-back, live-and-let-live place, it changed. They [Nepalis] realized that it was a tourist heaven, that it was all sellable, it was a sellable paradise.

The countercultural impulse that had characterized global youth culture for the previous decade was ebbing away.

Part of this turn can be traced to anti-leftist policies instituted by conservative governments in the US and Europe. Part of it was a matter of

fashion: it was time for something new. And part of it was generational: as hippies aged, their priorities shifted. Marilyn Stablein spent six years wandering India and Nepal before settling with her partner in Swayambhu in the early 1970s and having her first child.

We never worry about our own health but now with the addition of a new baby, our lifestyle, once so exotic and magical, becomes sinister and threatening. . . . How different a new mother's life is. My former traveler's life fades into memory. (2003:183, 186)

Imposing hardships on oneself was one thing; imposing them on one's offspring was another. But many simply got tired of *their own* hardships. Recalling his decision to leave South Asia, one person recalled, "I had the blues. In my diary for that day I find: 'Brain dead. Plus: cracked heels, tropical sores, lost nails, broken teeth . . . lice, new bedbug bites, old mosquito bites, jammed sinuses, drastic weight loss, dhobi [washer man] itch'" (Tomory 1996:195). Eventually, roughing it yields diminishing returns.

For still others the hippie life finally fizzled out in tedium. Calling herself a "failed hippie," one woman told me of her travels across Asia from 1972 to 1974. "Eventually I just got bored of doing the hippie thing," she said. "I was in a bar in Kathmandu and somebody offered me a job so I just took it." Regardless of whether anyone around her noticed, in that instant she consciously traded the footloose freedom of the hippie lifestyle for the security and conformity of a job. Her decision illustrates how, in many cases, the hippie era ended not with changing *populations*, but with changing *people*. Writing of the self-imposed life on the road, Patricia Perkins notes that most people eventually arrive at a "flashpoint" of realization about time and money. "Most of us eventually hear the ticking clock, the dollars of our careers falling, one by one, into the trash barrel by the side of the road, the fascinating road. Then time begins to feel expensive" (1994:41).

It is now a cliché to say that the hippie generation "sold out" and embraced the bourgeois values of their parents. Yet they were little different from countless middle-class generations before them that had dabbled in anti-parental rebellion—a rebellion often expressed by embracing elements of the lifestyles of lower-class or marginalized groups against which "respectable" people defined themselves. But the hippie counterculture in Nepal was always a lifestyle, not a life: it was "hobby poverty," as one Nepali observer put it. No matter how extreme people made it, life on the road or "living in Nepal" was a manifestation of Western middle-class privilege. The safety net (passports, parental resources) was almost always there to catch those who fell. Their experiences in places like Nepal may have been transformative in terms of gaining an understanding of life beyond the comfort-

able confines of the West. They were, I believe, better people for having seen different parts of the world, and for having lived in ways that few of their Western peers had done before. But few ultimately chose to forego their own social privilege. Sooner or later everyone reached the “flashpoint” of realization that maintaining that social privilege for oneself and one’s offspring would require harnessing oneself to the yoke of a bourgeois career. Time on the “fascinating road” began to feel expensive even if it was dirt cheap.

The global economic downturn following the 1973 OPEC oil embargo hastened the end of the hippie era. Rising global oil prices had the welcome effect of finally ending the ground war in Vietnam (though bombing continued). Troops returning from Vietnam took some of the political wind out of the countercultural sails but more than anything it was global recession that put the fear into the hearts of hippie baby boomers. With money tightening and jobs harder to get the hedonistic and carefree days of the 1960s’ Western bull economy were over. Hard times spurred the trend toward social conservatism that characterized the 1970s, a period when young people were less inclined to live for the moment and instead lived for the future by getting serious about education, careers, goals, savings, and responsibility.

A man who drove “freak buses” from Istanbul to Kathmandu from 1970 to 1975 perfectly captured the shifting ethos of those years. When he started, the main question people asked was “How much?” Five years later the determining question had become, “How long?” (Tomory 1996:21). With time now the limiting factor, and with airfares dropping, fewer and fewer people were interested in *the journey*—the Kerouac-inspired experience of life on the road. Rather than pursuing travel as an end in itself people were now focused on *destinations*.

This shift away from travel and toward destinations occurred at exactly the moment Nepalis began actively peddling their country as a stand-alone adventure destination. The global recession briefly hit Nepal’s tourist industry but by the mid-1970s arrival numbers were again climbing fast. Looking to buy adventure, and wanting value for their money, the new tourists turned their back on Freak Street with its grungy hippie vibe. These tourists needed a new destination and Nepali entrepreneurs responded by providing Thamel.

The Demise of Freak Street

Today Freak Street still has a number of lodges and restaurants catering to young, low-budget tourists and at least one local businessman I spoke

with rejected the very premise of my question about why the Jhochétole area had declined. “What decline?” he asked. “Business is as good as it ever was. You just have to give the tourists what they want.” Judging by the looks of tourists now wandering the area it seems that Freak Street has become a pilgrimage site for people looking to relive the now-fabled 1960s countercultural experience. But even if some local merchants are holding on by serving the nostalgia trade, the fact is that most of Nepal’s tourism growth since the mid-1970s, even within the budget market, has occurred off Freak Street. By the late 1990s tourist arrivals were ten times those of 1975 but the vast majority were going to Thamel, the new tourist enclave on the northern outskirts of Kathmandu.

How did Freak Street lose out to Thamel? To begin with, youth culture changed: as the 1970s progressed, even budget travelers had rising expectations and demands. A Freak Street merchant explained,

At first [tourists] were satisfied with simple rooms but later they were looking for special facilities. It wasn’t like that before. Then they didn’t care about *anything*. Attached bath? They could have cared less. **Simple life, simple room.** They just wanted to enjoy.

Some sense of this shift comes through in two accounts of visits to Freak Street hotels. The first, from 1971, describes a stay at D. D. Sharma’s famous Inn Eden hotel (in the same building as his even more famous hashish shop) located in a prime spot at the head of Freak Street. With tender affection a traveler describes the hotel’s dirt, rats, “disgusting” rooms, and “disgraceful bedding” before pronouncing it a “marvelous place” in the heart of the “ancient district.” For him, living in the “antediluvian warren” of old Kathmandu was exactly the experience he had sought in Nepal (Tomory 1996:189–90). Yet only a few years later, by the mid-1970s another visitor described Freak Street’s hotels as “lousy,” “dismal” “shithouses” where the food made you sick (Tomory 1996:191–92). The gritty, visceral, supposedly “authentic” experience that the freak-era tourists coveted had become a disgusting and unbearable hardship. Increasingly even budget tourists expected to experience Nepal as a *tourist* destination—with accommodations at least approximating the comforts of home. They were less and less interested in imagining themselves living like the local people. Visitors expected their “adventure” to be of the wholesome outdoorsy kind, not the traumatic Third World kind. Rats and filthy toilets were not the adventure they had paid for. As Pico Iyer put it, “the quest” had become “a trek” (1988:77).

Many Freak Street area merchants felt the change coming but there was little they could do to accommodate the new demands. The original wave

of tourism “development” around Jhochétole had meant renovating existing structures: turning family homes into lodges or ground-floor spaces into restaurants. But in these old structures it was virtually impossible to meet new tourist expectations for more spacious, well-lit rooms with attached modern baths. D. D. Sharma saw the changes coming and invested big money in a new Eden Hotel a few blocks away from the original Inn Eden. But problems began even before construction. Unable to buy more than a single lot in the tightly packed old Newar neighborhood (locals weren’t eager to sell to outsiders), Sharma was forced to build *up*. At nine stories the Eden Hotel was the tallest building in Kathmandu for some time, boasting an elevator and three-star carpeted guest rooms. But it struggled to attract new tourists to the old tourist district. Today the Eden Hotel (barely) survives on Indian business travelers, with rates lower than when the hotel opened more than forty years ago.

The Eden Hotel’s plight illustrates many of the problems that Freak Street faced in the new tourism market. To achieve the economies of scale needed to succeed, builders needed large properties for big new structures. But even if you could get numerous families to sell adjacent lots, or (even more challenging) get numerous squabbling siblings to agree to sell jointly owned properties, the price of prime urban real estate was prohibitive. It just didn’t make sense to put up grand new buildings in the heart of the old city.

What’s more, the wealthy Newar families that owned the properties and could have developed them rarely seemed to grasp the changing scene. For them tourism was a sideline business. A Kathmandu travel agent complained:

These Freak Street *wallas* [types], they weren’t hotel people. They didn’t really understand what they were doing. They wouldn’t make things a little cleaner or nicer. They didn’t develop at all. . . . As long as the money was coming in, they wouldn’t change a thing. Once something better was available [in Thamel], people moved on.

In the Jhochétole area the tourist trade was still almost literally a cottage industry: businesses run from the home. Few of those who actually owned property understood that tourism was about to become big business requiring big capital.

Another problem with the Freak Street area was that few people who *ran businesses* actually *owned property*. Most restaurant and curio shop owners, and even many lodge businesses, rented space from local Newar families. This both limited profits for people running businesses (who had to pay rent), and discouraged investments in upgrades. Property owners were content to collect rent but business operators didn’t want to spend money

upgrading someone else's property. Business owners understood changing tourist demands but property owners had little incentive to get involved.

Many local business people pointed to the 1973 delegalization of the cannabis trade as a turning point for Freak Street's fortunes. Not surprisingly, when the trade was criminalized, criminals took up the trade. Few if any local Newar property owners were willing to risk involvement in the drug trade and therefore ever more outsiders moved into the Freak Street area to cash in on the new black market in drugs. Because there was also good money to be made in illegal foreign currency exchange, changing money and selling dope were often tandem operations.

As a result, Freak Street's economy was increasingly fueled by illegal activities controlled by shady, nonresident actors—from the poor street hustlers harassing tourists, to “kingpin” types who stayed out of sight. Many people recalled a rise in petty violence including fights between foreigners and street touts over drug transactions. If you were from an old resident Newar family, the last thing you wanted was a reputation for cheating foreigners. But outsiders were there to make quick money and had little honor to defend. A former Freak Street lodge owner explained:

Things deteriorated. I mean at least once a day there'd be a **street fight**, even in broad day light. These were between Nepalis and tourists. Those Nepalis who came here from the outside had the single intention of cheating the tourists. So there was this violence and a decline in security. After that tourism also declined. This place got a reputation for being dangerous.

The illegal drug trade after 1973 cast a pall over Freak Street and contributed to its growing reputation as an unsavory place.

When the first tourist establishments opened in Thamel in the early 1970s most people in Kathmandu considered the area a godforsaken wasteland. On the outskirts of town, sparsely populated, and partly overgrown with trees and bushes, it was an area where people worried about ghosts. But Thamel had plenty of land at low prices. Once the seed of a new tourism service sector was planted, and the new breed of tourists discovered Thamel, the area experienced an unprecedented boom, as I will describe in the following chapters. Frequently Thamel's gain was literally Freak Street's loss: from the mid-1970s onward dozens of businesses pulled up stakes in Jhochétole and relocated to Thamel. Restaurant and shop owners who could never afford to buy the properties they had rented could, with savings and loans, buy good-sized properties in Thamel. A few of these businesses, like the Third Eye and Yin Yang Restaurants, still operate in Thamel today.

A surprising number of business owners on Freak Street were Tibetans from the refugee settlements in the Kathmandu Valley. Many of them moved their businesses to Thamel. One of the more spectacular stories is of the Tibetan owner of the Don't Pass Me By restaurant on Freak Street. In the mid-1970s he moved to Thamel and eventually built the Potala Guest House, one of Thamel's largest budget lodges. Though an exaggeration, one Jhochétole resident explained Freak Street's demise with the simple observation, "because many Tibetans went to Thamel."

Conclusion

Comparing Nepal tourist guidebooks written before and after 1975, one finds an important difference in the shortlist of "must see" spots in Kathmandu. Along with Durbar Square, Swayambhu, and Bodhanath, after 1975 Freak Street becomes one of Kathmandu's prime tourist attractions. The guidebooks embed all the other sites in Nepali history, but invariably describe Freak Street as a location within Western history. It was "the terminus of the hippie trail," a "hotbed of 1960s radical counter-culture," and so on. Like Haight-Ashbury, Greenwich Village, or Soho, Freak Street is now a geographic icon for a particular Western historical experience. Even as the hippie era suffered the backlash of negative popular opinion, it was being reconstituted as an object of nostalgic longing with Freak Street's fortunes sharing the same fate. Freak Street has come to represent a historical moment that is spatially discontinuous with what surrounds it.

Of course Freak Street's history isn't foreign at all but rather, like all history, profoundly interactive—in this case, on a truly global scale. On Freak Street many historical streams merged, bringing people together in unprecedented ways, with unexpected results. Fortunately for Nepal, global culture was shifting even as the country rebranded itself as an "adventure destination" and sought to replace hippies with more free-spending adventure tourists. From Rimbaud to Rambo, Jimi Hendrix to John Travolta, Janis Joplin to Olivia Newton John—after 1973 there was a clear shift in the general ethos of global youth culture away from the anti-establishment sentiments of the 1960s and toward a more conservative, consumerist mode in which "experience" was *not* something to be sought existentially, but to be bought in packaged form. By the late 1970s Freak Street was a ghost of its old self while Thamel boomed as the gateway to Nepal's new, healthy, drug-free, yuppie adventure vacation lands. Nepal tourism had entered a new age.

PART THREE

Adventure Tourism

Adventure Nepal: Trekking, Thamel, and the New Tourism

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately . . . and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. THOREAU, *WALDEN*

Through the ages many have shared Henry David Thoreau's fear of dying without having lived. But the longing to break from scripted routine surely grew more intense in the context of twentieth-century capitalism with its soul-crushing wage labor, ant-like corporate careers, and shallow consumerist values. While Thoreau sought escape in the woods, by the mid-twentieth century those seeking to escape modernity looked farther afield. Long an icon of mystical alterity in the Western imagination, Nepal in the 1970s emerged as a quintessential destination for foreigners desperate to inject meaning into lives. Nepal's rebranding as an "adventure destination" aimed to cash in on that longing.

In this chapter I trace these twin shifts—in foreign tourists' desires and in Nepal's tourism objectives—as they meshed in remarkably fortuitous ways. Picking up from chapter 3's discussion of the early days of mountaineering and trekking, here I describe trekking's huge surge in popularity and the emergence of a full-scale service industry surrounding it. A trek is something one not only *does* but, crucially, *buys*. Unlike the hippies, trekkers came to Nepal in search of a commercial service—an adventure. Seeking value for money, trekkers brought very different

expectations for their touristic experience, expectations that Freak Street couldn't fulfill. Anticipating this shift, Kathmandu entrepreneurs constructed an entirely new tourist district known as Thamel. Tourists came to Nepal to *live* before they died, but they were going to pay Nepalis for the privilege.

The Rise of Adventure Tourism

Apart from its reputation for remoteness and timelessness, one significant reason for Kathmandu's appeal was, of course, its proximity to the world's highest mountains. For decades "Kathmandu" was the byline on news stories of mountaineering feats and Abominable Snowman hunts. Foreigners came—at least in part—to be near the earth's celebrated "third pole." In this regard the hippie era represents something of an anomaly in that during its heyday (1968–73) many were attracted to Kathmandu as much for "the scene" as for the scenery. Plenty of hippies went trekking but plenty more got trekking permits simply to extend their visas. Thus the trekking boom that begins in the early 1970s represents an important change in the *nature* of Kathmandu as a youth destination. Kathmandu's hippie attraction continued but as arrival numbers climbed steeply year after year, the percentage of those interested in "the scene" dwindled while those intent on getting into the scenery soared. Kathmandu continued to fascinate but increasingly it became a gateway to (and place to recover from) "mountain adventure."

According to Paul Beedie, "adventure tourism" is an activity that combines "travel, sport, and outdoor recreation" (2003:203). It is a kind of "serious leisure" that introduces a degree of uncertainty and risk into physical activities in unusual places. But if adventure implies peril, the commodified, packaged product offered by adventure service providers guarantees that tourists "have their experiences defined for them" in carefully managed ways that minimize risk (Beedie 2003:213).

Adventure tourists have a completely different relationship to time and money than Nepal's earlier budget travelers. Hippie travelers were time rich and cash poor. Adventure tourists are the opposite: "rich monetarily but poor in time. They want to squeeze as much experience into as short a time as possible" (Beedie 2003:211). Lacking time to develop the skills and knowledge needed to pursue exploits on their own, adventure tourists turn to the classic figure of "the guide" (a person or a book) whose presence "supersedes the need for the individual to make choices" and allows them to "rely on the expertise of others to provide the wherewithal

to complete their adventure” (Beedie 2003:230, 221). Trekking in Nepal emerged in the 1970s as the prototypical form of “adventure tourism” as time-poor tourists paid local service providers to make possible experiences they could not pull off themselves.

Nepal’s transformation into an adventure destination is closely linked to the gradual replacement of overland travelers with those arriving by air (Tomory 1996:xiv). By the mid-1970s the Road to Kathmandu was definitely losing its cachet. Traveling on one’s own seemed more and more risky while joining a tour bus group was not only expensive but vaguely uncool. What’s more, thanks to new economies of scale in the airline industry, it had actually become more expensive to travel overland with most commercial operators, than to fly to Nepal. Increasingly, overland travel was “only for rich people” (PAR 11/29/75).

The shift meant a change in Kathmandu’s tourist ethos. Those who had arrived via the Road to Kathmandu were often distinctly different from those who had flown in from out of the blue. “Overland travelers are more tolerant,” observed one tourist in 1975. “They can adjust more easily than other travelers” (PAR 3/9/75). Jerry Beisler made a similar distinction. Returning to Nepal in the mid-1970s, Beisler (2006:128) writes:

Nepal was rapidly becoming a different place from the Nepal we had experienced earlier in the decade. Hippies had originally come to Nepal hitchhiking overland and by train and bus out of Europe on journeys that were not unlike pilgrimages. Traveling slowly out of the modern life of Western civilization and into the ancient world of Asia somehow acclimated the traveler. Western focus turned to Eastern philosophy and our understanding of local customs and traditions dawned, for most of us, by simply taking our time and “going with the flow.” This acclimation included a trade-off of modern life’s stresses and values. It took all our energy to handle the stress of everyday life traveling in Asia.

Beisler’s observations on the *acclimating* effect of months spent on the road in Asia are insightful. Making it to Nepal overland was a feat of endurance but also a measure of the traveler’s resourcefulness, flexibility, and willingness to adapt to local circumstances. People arriving in Kathmandu by air might have these traits but without the acclimating and winnowing effect of the RTK, there was a much higher likelihood that they would not.

Beisler’s hippie overlanders may not have been better people than the growing numbers of air-traveling adventure tourists but they were different people. Kathmandu was no longer the end of The Road, but a staging area for packaged adventure. By the late 1970s overland arrivals were

in steady decline (Satyal 2000:22) even before the 1979 Iranian Revolution and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan severed the RTK for good.

Many sensed the changing character of tourism that was settling over Kathmandu in the mid-1970s. Returning to Nepal in 1974 after several years away, one American aid worker noted a “quantum shift” in the tourism sector. The extremes of five-star stopover tourism and bottom-of-the-barrel hippie tourism continued. “But what was expanding rapidly was a middle-strata of adventure types, mainly going trekking. I noticed a huge jump in restaurants and tourists being around.” A Western academic who had been away from Nepal between 1968 and 1974 observed that “there was a watershed. I don’t know what it was, but I felt it when I got here. I could sense the future, and it wasn’t good.” He watched as rice paddies filled with hotels and vistas grew cluttered with signage.

Another returning visitor noted a change in the kind of people she encountered in Kathmandu tourist establishments. On her first visit to Nepal in the early 1970s

people tended to be very reflective and thoughtful. I mean they didn’t tend to talk in categories. Their responses weren’t stereotyped. But the people later, it seemed as though they thought they knew it all and you could predict what they were going to say.

Unlike many budget travelers of the 1960s who left home with few clothes, a bit of money, and a romantic dream of life on the road, these new adventure tourists arrived in Kathmandu equipped with guidebooks that provided them the information and expertise needed to navigate the strange world they had so suddenly descended into. As many Nepalis noted, the new guidebook-guided tourists were more cautious, less open to conversation, more afraid of being cheated, and seemingly less curious.

Guidebooks themselves often contributed to this sense of unease. Beyond recommending hotels or giving historical background for self-guided sightseeing tours, guidebooks warned of the “shock” in store for would-be visitors to Nepal. “The inexperienced visitor must be cautious when traveling in Nepal,” warns a Fodor’s guide to South Asia from the 1980s. “The visitor is likely to be both shocked and enchanted. . . . [T]he sight of poverty, crumbling old houses, dirty streets littered with piles of garbage, or cows wandering loose through the narrow streets” may bring “upset” and “culture shock” to “less experienced travelers” (Dannhorn 1986:466). While certainly not discouraging a visit to Nepal, this guidebook—like many others—put tourists on their guard, wary of shocking experiences, and cautious of the unexpected.

Whereas the hippies had romantically imagined Nepal's antique timelessness to be the countercultural antithesis of (or antidote to) the West, the new tourists saw Nepal's "backwardness" as part of the risk involved in their temporary "adventures" in Third World living. Now Nepal's imagined non-modernity was reconstituted as an enchanting though vaguely dangerous condition into which brave adventurers could time-travel, experience the thrill of alterity, and then return to the comforting if monotonous routines of their modern lives. Visiting Kathmandu in the early 1980s, journalist Pico Iyer hoped to recapture the legendary hippie vibe of late 1960s Kathmandu but instead encountered

brigades of bright, clean-cut foreigners . . . marching from the Zen Restaurant to the Third Eye Boutique and back again. . . . And as surely as the eighties had eclipsed the sixties, so trekking seemed mostly to have usurped questing. These days, more people came to Nepal to improve their muscles than to expand their minds; the career path was held in much higher esteem than the spiritual path. (Iyer 1988: 100–101)

As I touched upon in the last chapter, over the 1970s global tourists and tourism changed, reflecting the swing away from the countercultural radicalism of the previous decade and back toward the more conservative and consumerist end of the economic and cultural spectrum. From 1972 onward Nepal's new King Birendra helped drive this shift by radically re-orienting the state's approach toward tourism.

King Birendra and the Eco/Adventure Turn

I have already related the particular confluence of factors that convinced King Birendra to embrace tourism as one of the main pillars of Nepal's economic future. "Trekking Tourism" became the key element of a "completely specific Nepalese tourism product" and the basis of a new "Nepal Brand of Tourism" (Schmidt 1975:34). But why trekking and adventure tourism in particular? In part because officials believed trekking would increase the length of tourist stays and help distribute tourist money to rural Nepal (Schmidt 1975:24). But Birendra's rebranding of Nepal as an eco-adventure land was also a way for Nepal to strategically hitch its tourism and development wagons to the environmental movement then rising to global prominence. In the wake of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), the Cuyahoga River Fire of 1969, and the Love Canal disaster of the early 1970s, the American environmental movement grew in prominence along with similar movements around the world. Environmentalism was

clearly an emerging global ethic and in it King Birendra saw a way of symbolically repositioning Nepal in the world's imagination.

Nepal—it turns out—played an important part in this rising global environmental consciousness though, ironically, not one seemingly conducive to tourism. From the early 1970s, scientists increasingly portrayed Nepal as a zone of “ecological crisis” because of its overpopulation, deforestation, soil erosion, and agricultural decline (Croes 2006). In a series of influential articles and books, environmentalist Eric Eckholm (1975, 1976) proclaimed “Tragedy in Shangri-La” and turned Nepal into a poster child for global environmental crisis. Though many of Eckholm's claims have since been critiqued as exaggerated or wrong (Guthman 1997), they nevertheless set the tone for at least a decade of global attention on Nepal's environmental degradation, conservation, and sustainability.

With global environmental consciousness on the rise and Nepal increasingly associated with “ecological crisis,” under King Birendra Nepal quickly reoriented its development agenda around the new eco-discourses of conservation and sustainability. Notable here is how tourism fit into this new discursive landscape. With international donor agencies eager to fund environmental initiatives, in 1973 Nepal established a new Department of Soil and Water Conservation aimed expressly at reaping a harvest of new environmental aid money. That same year Nepal also established a Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation and simultaneously created four new national parks. In so doing, Nepal essentially nationalized its principal tourism assets under the sign of eco-consciousness and conservation.

Crucial to recognize is how trekking and eco/adventure tourism fit into the broader world of shifting international politics (the end of Cold War) and new eco-development discourses. Trekking was a way of getting tourists to spend more time and money in Nepal but it was also part of the state's fundamental reorientation toward new global aid paradigms. By turning its already world-famous mountain and jungle landscapes into national parks and “wildlife conservation” areas, Nepal could rebrand its nascent tourism in those regions as “ecotourism.” These parks were officially designed to protect endangered landscapes and animals but they also offered tourists the chance to visit relatively pristine areas *and* imagine that they were contributing to their conservation (through park fees, etc.). Chitwan had for the previous century been world-famous for its charismatic megafauna: tigers, one-horned rhinos, elephants. Newly christened a wildlife conservation area, Chitwan now became an eco-adventure spot to visit. Similarly in the high Himalayas—an area that Kenneth Croes (2006:15) astutely dubs a “charismatic topology”—what

had for decades been world-famous mountaineering destinations now became conservation areas where visitors could imagine that they were helping ward off the broader Himalayan ecological crisis even if, in fact, they mainly ended up contributing to it (Rogers 2007). Under Birendra, Nepal attempted to catch and ride the wave of global eco-consciousness to prosperity through “crisis” aid in some areas and ecotourism in others. In modern parlance, one could say that Birendra’s Nepal gave its existing development and tourism interests a good “green washing,” transforming them into conservation and eco-adventures.

The growing dominance of adventure tourists and tourism occurred gradually through the mid-1970s but King Birendra’s official coronation on February 24, 1975, serves as a convenient symbolic launch point for the new trekking/eco/adventure tourism era. For months prior to the event, reports circulated on Kathmandu streets that anyone vaguely approximating a hippie would be expelled. As immigration officers fanned out across the city demanding to see visas (PAR 2/8/75) some young tourists went trekking, some fled to Pokhara (Nepal’s other principal tourist town), and some laid low in rented apartments. But “countless [other] hippies [were] hustled across the border into India” (Hutchins 2007:47). *Time* magazine reported that the city’s pre-coronation facelift involved rounding up stray cows, dogs, and hippies. “Western hippies who for years have regarded Kathmandu as a kind of real-life Shangri-La were banished for the occasion” (*Time* 1975).

Those who managed to stay noted the city’s freshly painted, tidy appearance along with an unprecedented police presence (Lomax 1981:171). On the one hand security measures were meant to protect the star-studded cast of royal guests—including Imelda Marcos, Prince Charles, and other royalty and dignitaries from around the world. (Most popular with Nepalis was Dev Anand—Indian film star, director, and friend of the royal family—who was mobbed wherever he went!) On the other hand, officials feared acts of popular dissent. Complaints about money wasted on coronation extravagancies were built on long-standing discontent over the country’s nondemocratic “Panchayat Democracy” (Lomax 1981:89). Whereas Mahendra’s 1956 coronation had seen huge crowds of ordinary Nepalis descend on Kathmandu to enthusiastically celebrate their god-king,¹ the 1975 ceremony was more tense and small-scale. “The crowds were restrained and smaller than expected. The constant rumours about some sort of protest or disturbance had kept many people at home in fear. . . . As the king passed, a subdued ripple of clapping and cheering passed along the pavements” (Lomax 1981:171).

1. Historically Nepal’s Shah kings were regarded as incarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu.

One element that Birendra's coronation *did* share with that of his father's was the need to vigorously assert Nepal's sovereignty. In the previous decade the Chinese had solidified their control over Tibet to the north. To the south, the years just prior to Birendra's coronation had seen India systematically annexing anomalous border territories including Portuguese Goa, French Pondicherry, and Nepal's immediate neighbor Sikkim where India disenfranchised an ancient ruling family. "Birendra's enthronement was designed to serve notice to both Socialist India and Communist China that Nepal's archaic monarchy possessed visibility and credibility world-wide" (Hutchins 2007:59).

With a new kind of tourist coming to Nepal, a new savvy king in command, and a new eco-adventure tourism policy in place, the stage was set for Nepal's rechristening as a trekking adventure tourism destination.

Trekking Tourism

Exactly what constitutes "trekking" and when trekking began in Nepal are matters open to debate, sometimes heated. Chapter 3 described some of the adventurous souls who walked into the mountains to see the high peaks made famous by mountaineers, several of whom made it all the way to the Khumbu Valley beneath Mt. Everest more than a decade before the Nepal government officially opened the region and the first "commercial trekking tourists arrived in Khumbu in February 1965" (Rogers 2007:41). These first *official* trekkers, led by Jimmy Roberts and Mountain Travel were elderly Americans, as were most tourists in Nepal before the mid-1960s. Even as more and more young tourists arrived in the late 1960s, relatively few of them went trekking. This is because the early high-end guide services were prohibitively expensive for budget travelers, and do-it-yourself trekking guidebooks didn't yet exist.

Though relatively few hippie-era tourists went trekking, those who did were an intrepid breed. A British woman—in her early twenties when she traveled overland to Nepal in 1967—described walking with a girlfriend from Kathmandu to Pokhara at a time when there were no guidebooks, no roads, and nothing but crude maps.

Yeah we just walked, not even knowing that there was no road there. We wanted to see the lake [near Pokhara] so we just went, you know, west! I mean we looked at a map and figured "Oh, maybe three days?" Right. And so we got lost, and up and down, and it was . . . yeah, it was great! We got there twelve days later.

Communicating by sign language, eating in trail-side tea shops, and sleeping on farmhouse verandas, these women were traveling in the “On the Road” overland spirit where time was plentiful, money was scarce, and the cultural experience of the journey was as important as the destination.

By the early 1970s Pokhara was acquiring a reputation as much as a launching point for trekking adventures as a destination in itself. I interviewed an American man who, in his late twenties in 1971, had arrived in Nepal overland but decided to fly to Pokhara and walk north into the mountains to Jomsom. Not sure what to wear or take, in Kathmandu he bought a pair of Vietnam “jungle boots” from an American GI, “which turned out to be disastrous. Anyway, I flew to Pokhara, got off onto the dirt airfield, and asked directions to Jomsom. Somebody pointed north and I started walking.” Following an ancient trade route, he walked up the Kali Gandaki River valley to the arid, rain shadow region that culturally and geographically resembles Tibet. “I was staying with porters, sleeping on the floors of teahouses, eating *dal-bhat* [lentils and rice]. On that whole trip [about a month] I didn’t see a single other foreigner.” For people who didn’t care about time and who were motivated more by cultural encounters than the idea of efficiently traversing a route, striking out into the void was part of the appeal of mountain walking.

As stories of mountain adventures began circulating in Kathmandu’s lodges and restaurants more and more budget travelers headed for the hills. But what really boosted trekking tourism was the arrival of trekking guidebooks that made possible the thrill of getting into beautiful and remote parts of Nepal without the uneasy sense of unpredictability. Though there were occasional references to trekking in some early guidebooks, the first focused, useful information source was Don Messerschmidt’s “How to Trek in Nepal” published in an American mountaineering magazine in 1968. Messerschmidt plugs both the already standard list of destinations (Helambu/Gosainkund, Jomsom, Jumla, Everest Base Camp) and Jimmy Roberts’s Mountain Travel guide service for whom Messerschmidt led treks in the late 1960s.

Also in 1968 Nepali writer Prakash A. Raj decided to find out what trekking was all about. Born and raised in a prosperous Kathmandu family, Raj had never seen the rural parts of his own homeland before setting off for Jomsom and becoming one of the first Nepalis ever to *trek* in Nepal—that is, intentionally walk the mountain trails for pleasure rather than necessity. In November 1971 Raj decided to publish an account of his trek in the national English-language newspaper, *The Rising Nepal*. Between his 1968 trek and his 1971 account of it, Raj had also traveled in Europe

where he enjoyed using a guidebook which, he writes, “had given me lots of hints about how to travel in Europe and still enjoy it, even if I did not have much money” (Raj 1973:1). Returning to his hometown to find it swarming with young budget travelers like himself, Raj decided that Nepal needed a guidebook like the one he had used in Europe—full of tips on where to eat, where to stay, where to find buses, and how to save money. The result was Raj’s pathbreaking *Nepal on Two Dollars a Day*, first published in 1973. In addition to detailed practical information for budget tourists in Kathmandu, Raj’s book included his 1971 Jomsom trek travelogue (plus accounts of treks to Helambu and the Everest region). Published in Kathmandu and available in local bookstores for about two dollars, it was quickly in the hands of thousands of young budget tourists who set out on treks in unprecedented numbers. Among these were Maurine and Tony Wheeler who, in 1976, bought the rights to Raj’s book and released it as one of the first titles from their new Lonely Planet publishing house.²

Around the same time that Raj discovered trekking and decided to make it more accessible to budget travelers, Canadian climber Stephen Bezruchka was doing the same. Inspired by Messerschmidt’s 1968 *Summit* magazine article promoting Nepal trekking, Bezruchka came to Nepal in 1969 where he quickly became an inveterate trekker. Bezruchka heeded Messerschmidt’s advice regarding unguided outings—“the ‘going-your-own’ approach is highly unrecommended,” warned Messerschmidt (1968:14)—but only to a point. Rather than using an expensive trekking agency, Bezruchka hired a “young inexperienced Sherpa” looking to break into the business (Bezruchka 1985:20). Traversing the main routes out of Kathmandu, Pokhara, and the Everest area convinced Bezruchka of the need for a detailed guide that would help future trekkers know what to expect and plan ahead. While a medical student at Stanford, Bezruchka managed to write *A Guide to Trekking in Nepal*, first published in 1972 by a small Kathmandu press.³ Locally available, inexpensive, and full of practical advice—from detailed trek descriptions to health tips and instruction in basic Nepali—Bezruchka’s *Guide to Trekking* was immediately popular and has been a mainstay for generations of Nepal adventure tourists.

The other leading contender for most-popular Nepal trekking guide is Stan Armington’s *Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya* first published in 1975. In

2. Lonely Planet renamed the book *Kathmandu and the Kingdom of Nepal*.

3. Bezruchka’s trekking guide went through three editions with Kathmandu’s Sahayogi Press before being bought out by Mountaineers Books of Seattle. The book has been in print ever since, now in its eighth edition (2011).

the late 1960s Armington was a young engineer working for a California firm but his real passion was the hiking and climbing he binged on during weekends and vacations. In 1969 he came to Nepal on a group trek to the Everest region⁴ organized by a new US-based Himalayan trekking agency.⁵ Inspired, Armington quit his career in the US and became a trekking guide in Nepal in 1971 before returning to the US for a job organizing adventure outings to Nepal for REI in 1974. “It took off like a bang,” said Armington. “There were over thirty-five people already on the second trip [in 1975].” Armington’s 1975 Nepal trekking guidebook was a compilation of predeparture literature he had prepared for REI clients and accounts of trekking routes derived from his own experience.⁶

These three early trekking guides—by Raj, Bezruchka, and Armington—simultaneously reflected and assisted the turn toward adventure tourism in the early 1970s. Each book helped transform a vaguely understood possible outing into a thoroughly predictable trek capable of being neatly scheduled into tightly coordinated international and domestic travel plans. In fact one of the principal functions of these books is to allow time-strapped tourists the ability to choose a trek that fits their schedule, from day walks to months-long expeditions. (Bezruchka actually arranges the treks in his book according to time required to complete them [1985:44].) It seems more than coincidental that Bezruchka and Armington—doctor and engineer, respectively—would have a keen sense of the demands and time constraints under which the new breed of cash-rich/time-poor adventure tourists were operating. Trekking guidebooks were an essential element in the turn toward the tightly scheduled, focused, and agenda-driven ethos of adventure tourism.

These books mark the end of the hippie era in other ways as well. Armington in particular seems intent on promoting a view of trekking that is critical of earlier practices. First, Armington wants to distinguish trekking from Western-style backpack hiking. Americans and Europeans used to carrying heavy rucksacks into wilderness areas on self-sufficient hikes end up “disappointed and often bitter” if they attempt such a thing in Nepal, says Armington (1975:14).

4. Fellow trekkers included Tenzing Norgay and other Everest summiteers, as well as Jimmy Roberts and Boris Lissanevitch!

5. Known as “Mountain Travel US” this new agency was founded by Leo LeBon (a former Thomas Cooke travel agent) and others including Barry Bishop, the American Everest summiteer and *National Geographic* writer. Though LeBon initially had a cooperative relationship with Jimmy Roberts and the original Mountain Travel trekking agency in Kathmandu, the two parties eventually quarreled over rights to the name “Mountain Travel.”

6. *Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya* was originally published by La Siesta Press (Glendale, CA) in 1975 before being bought out by Lonely Planet with which it is now in its ninth edition (2009).

Do not attempt to treat Nepal as an extension of the Sierra and the Cascades and carry [lots of stuff]. The trekker who packs his segment of our culture along with him is little different from that rich tourist ordering his martini. He will see the same scenery as the trekker who follows the directions in this book, but will develop little understanding of Nepal, its people, and its culture. (1975:15)

Whereas the backpacker may follow the John Muir impulse of escaping civilization, trekking in Nepal involves walking through rural but well-populated landscapes where a self-contained backpacker is no better than an antisocial, martini-swilling elitist.

Both Bezruchka and Armington identify the same short list of possible “trekking styles” but whereas Bezruchka leaves it up to the trekker to decide which is best for them, Armington paints the four choices in rather stark moral terms. “The backpacker,” says Armington, “breaks two cardinal rules for travelers in Nepal: he does not contribute to the economy, and . . . doesn’t have time or inclination to entertain villagers” (1975:29). The second approach, “living off the land,” involves carrying one’s own clothes and bedding but eating in local tea shops. This depletes local food supplies, causes local food price inflation, and ultimately hurts local people. Third is the “do it yourself approach” of arranging your own portered trek. Armington discourages this because it takes time to arrange and you may end up getting cheated (1975:32–35). For Armington the fourth and best approach is “complete arrangements through a trekking agency,” which he defends as having the lowest impact on local environments and highest likelihood of good relations between trekkers and local people. (1975:35). When I interviewed Armington and asked why he had pushed the trekking agency option so hard he gave a good-natured laugh and acknowledged, “Because I was in the business and was trying to peddle things!” But he noted that he was also directly critiquing Bezruchka’s trekking guide:

Bezruchka’s style was staying in tea houses but tea houses then aren’t like they are now. Back then it was somebody’s *house* and you’d be eating *dal-bhat* from the local supply. Somebody in the 1970s who didn’t speak Nepali and didn’t know where they were going, they were going to have trouble and they were going to *cause* trouble as well.

Armington was also an early advocate of an “ecotourism” ethic of packing in and packing out so as not to overwhelm local food and fuel supplies, or leave behind garbage.

But Armington saved his most pointed criticism for hippies. In the first

edition of his guide Armington notes disdainfully (1975:15) that although Nepal *had been* a “hippie mecca” and that “the remnants of that crowd still hang around Kathmandu and patronize a few black market dope dealers,” now “‘Freak Street’ has become as much a tourist attraction as the temples of Durbar Square.” Equally passé, says Armington, is the main element of the hippie lifestyle, namely, “the attempt to live as cheaply as possible. . . . Many of the problems in Nepal have resulted from this phenomenon” (1975:15). Instead of hippie miserliness, Armington’s new trekking ethic portrays spending money as almost a moral obligation to aid impoverished Nepalis. Thus consumer altruism emerges as a central tenet of the new adventure tourism charter: travel-on-the-cheap is greedy, whereas spending money unselfishly spreads the wealth. Hippie-era trekkers might have imagined they were spreading goodwill by attempting to live with and like local people but adventure tourists could imagine they were *helping* local people.

Trekking guidebooks were essential but for the trekking-as-adventure-tourism paradigm to really take off, the Nepali state had to throw its weight into the effort. In March 1972, shortly after Birendra assumed power, the Department of Tourism issued a pamphlet titled *Himalayan Profile* which is (to my knowledge) the first official promotion of trekking in Nepal. Though focused mainly on the Kathmandu Valley and its environs, the pamphlet includes specific information “for trekkers” and describes the area as offering “some of the most unusual and delightful trekking in matchless alpine meadows and forests” (Department of Tourism 1972). Then in April 1973 the government issued *Trekking in Nepal*, a twenty-page booklet that steadily grew in size through subsequent editions. Referring to Nepal as “a trekker’s Shangri-la” it promoted trekking as the only way to “follow in the footsteps of the conquerors of Everest . . . and other Himalayan peaks” as well as “the only way to get to interesting and remote mountain villages of Nepal and to enjoy close-up views of Himalayan giants” (Department of Tourism 1973:1). The booklet provides brief descriptions of the three main trekking areas (north of Kathmandu, north of Pokhara, and the Everest region) along with information on guide services. By the late 1970s the booklet had doubled in length, including information on the newly popular Annapurna Sanctuary and Annapurna Circuit treks, as well as on trekking peaks (Ministry of Tourism n.d.a.). About the same time the ministry released *Everest Trek: Nepal*, a larger-scale, twelve-page booklet with color photos and maps (Ministry of Tourism n.d.b).⁷ This

7. These two undated booklets appear to have been printed soon after the old Department of Tourism became an independent Ministry of Tourism in 1977.

promotional literature was part of a surge in government tourism publishing that took off in 1972 as Nepal began to actively position itself in the international tourism market.

To make trekking a realistic option for time-strapped adventure tourists, tourism officials realized that Nepal's trekking areas had to be made accessible by air, even if it meant raising the price of a trek. In a country where huge mountain topography and unstable geology make road building wildly expensive and road travel wildly time consuming, investment in air transportation infrastructure was the only way to get tourists quickly to and from trekking regions. But building airstrips on remote mountainsides also wasn't easy. The solution was for the national carrier (Royal Nepal Airlines Corporation, or RNAC) to phase out its old DC3s and in 1970 begin replacing them with a new fleet of small Short Take Off and Landing (STOL) aircraft (Satyal 2000:148–49). Pilatus PC-6 “Porter” and de Havilland DHC-6 “Twin Otter” aircraft could take off and land on runways less than two hundred meters long even at elevation. The early 1970s saw nineteen tiny new STOL airstrips clinging to mountainsides across Nepal including Lukla (on the approach route to Everest) and Jumla in western Nepal (M. B. Shrestha 2000:50). For busy adventure tourists hoping to trek to Everest Base Camp, a flight to and from Lukla was pricey but cut the time required in half—from one month to two weeks. New flights to Meghauli on the Nepal Tarai also made a Chitwan wildlife jungle adventure possible for more tourists. Aircraft were the magic ingredient that transformed remote parts of Nepal into adventure tourism hotspots.

One final piece of the emerging trekking tourism scene was various trekking services—from trekking agencies to equipment rental shops. After Jimmy Roberts's Mountain Travel (1964), the first Nepali-owned trekking agency was Sherpa Cooperative Trekking, founded by one of Roberts's former Sherpa office managers (Rogers 2007:88). By 1973 there were three Nepali-run trekking agencies (plus Mountain Travel) (Department of Tourism 1973:2), in 1975 eleven (Armington 1975:33), and twenty-eight in 1981; by 2000 537 trekking agencies were registered with the Nepal government (Kunwar 2002:79)! Looking back at the early days of trekking, one Kathmandu business man noted that

people saw it could be profitable and that's how it started. From one group you could earn two or three [hundred thousand rupees] profit in ten or fifteen days. We have to hire Sherpas to guide them, pay for their food and lodging costs. But often the trekkers don't use all the [budgeted] money. They get sick or cancel, or maybe they only drink water, but we can end up making lots of money. That's why there are so many trekking agencies around!

“What would we do without Sherpas?” he added. “They know the areas well, don’t get sick going up high, can carry like seventy or eighty kilos without [bottled] oxygen. There’s no way those of us down here could do that.” In fact the Sherpa “brand” has been key to the packaging of trekking tourism because of the Sherpa’s historic association with high-profile mountaineering (Adams 1996, Ortner 1999). Sherpas own about half of the major trekking agencies (Ortner 1999:258) and within the industry the word “Sherpa” is now as often an occupational category as an ethnic one. Thus a Nepali Tamang or Gurung trekking guide may be hired as a “Sherpa” and/or pass as one for tourists. Trekking guide services have become big business with Nepalis of many backgrounds cashing in on the Sherpa cachet.

From early on Nepal’s trekking services industry has handled two types of clients: the high-end tourists who book trekking services from abroad, and mid- to low-market tourists who come to Nepal on their own and make arrangements locally. The former spend big money but are skittish and fearful, backing away at the first sign of political instability anywhere in the hemisphere. The latter, known in the industry as foreign independent travelers or FITs, are more numerous and more frugal but also much less susceptible to political vicissitudes.⁸ Trekking agencies tend to focus on one or the other of these groups trying to court the fickle big spenders or maximize the economies of scale on the lower end.

It is this lower-end market of FITs that has spawned a whole range of businesses targeted at do-it-yourself trekkers. Since the 1960s Kathmandu restaurants served as convenient meeting points for trekkers seeking guides and porters, and guides and porters seeking employment. By the early 1970s Tashi’s Trek Restaurant on Freak Street had turned this phenomenon into a business strategy.⁹ In addition to getting a meal, at Tashi’s you could arrange trekking services, meet up with other trekkers, and peruse volumes of notebooks containing handwritten reports from the trekking trails. For one rupee per day Tashi would even store luggage for you while out on a trek. “I would consult Tashi if I were going for trekking,” advises Raj in his 1973 guidebook (1973:26–27, 31).

The other main trekking-related business was shops specializing in

8. The classic example of this was the virtual collapse of high-end trekking in Nepal during the Maoist Insurgency or Civil War between 1996 and 2005. Yet during the war the low end of the trekking market hung on, at reduced levels, even in Maoist held territories. In fact the Maoists often went out of their way to court tourists, collecting fees, issuing official receipts, and even providing souvenir passport stamps. For some years a Maoist trekking document was a prized possession in world backpacker circles and only added to Nepal’s allure as an adventure destination.

9. Tashi got his start in the restaurant business as head cook at Ravi Chawla’s Camp Restaurant in 1967.

equipment and supplies. Originally just part of the larger trade in secondhand tourist goods, by 1969 Freak Street boasted stores specializing in trekking gear. One shop, called “Trekker’s,” advertised in Kathmandu’s English-language newspaper, offering “rentals, sales, [and] trade-ins on trekking equipment. Featherlite ‘Cruiser’ frames with packs, large-scale maps, and other requisites.”¹⁰ Much of this was actually expedition surplus. Foreign mountaineers left behind huge amounts of new and used gear, and Sherpas themselves often sold used equipment provided to them by foreign employers. Much of this stuff eventually showed up in Kathmandu trekking shops which were, for decades, famous for offering lightly used, high-end climbing and camping gear for amazingly low prices. Many a tourist was inspired to become a trekker merely by the sight of the exotic mountaineering paraphernalia spilling out of Kathmandu trekking shops.

From the 1970s onward the booming trekking trade inspired Nepalis to go into a whole range of allied enterprises. Some produced specialty foods for trekkers including dried fruits, nuts, muesli, and trail mix. Others produced higher-quality, more-detailed maps of specific trekking areas than those available in guidebooks. Still others made special clothing and even equipment like backpacks and sleeping bags (often complete with The North Face and Jansport labels). It was clear to everyone—from King Birendra, to Kathmandu merchants, to the Sherpa community, to residents along the trekking routes—that adventure tourism was a giant cash cow that Nepalis could tether to the Himalayas and milk for all it was worth.

By the early 1970s all the pieces of this new trekking economy were falling into place: an emerging adventure ethos among a new breed of tourists, detailed guidebooks to help schedule a trek, government promotion of trekking including investment in air transportation, and a burgeoning service economy featuring trekking agencies, restaurants, and gear shops. Nepalis actively responded to and created demand for their “product” and watched as tourist numbers climbed an average of 13 percent per year between 1970 and 1980 (Satyal 2000:17).¹¹ Trekking played a large part in this rise. For example, between 1970 and 1973 the number of trekkers in the Everest region rose from three hundred to three thousand and continued to rise apace thereafter (Rogers 2007:44). In 1970 1.2 percent of tourists went trekking but by 1974 13 percent of tourists were trekkers (Shrestha 2000:14, Satyal 2000:18). By 1980 those rates had risen to 17 percent, and by 1990 about 25 percent of tourists went trekking (Satyal

10. *The Rising Nepal*, April 12, 1969, p. 12.

11. Excluding years disrupted by the Second Indo-Pak War of 1971 and the Oil Crisis of 1973, average annual tourism growth rates for Nepal during the 1970s are closer to 25 percent (Satyal 2000:14).

2000:193). When these figures are calculated *without* South Asian tourists (mainly Indians arriving in summer to escape the heat), roughly half of international arrivals in Nepal went trekking (Satyal 2000:144). What's more, while sightseeing tourists averaged three days in Nepal, trekkers averaged around three weeks (Satyal 2000:102–4). With ever more trekkers pouring into the country, in 1976 tourism moved into first place as Nepal's leading foreign-exchange earner (Satyal 1999:114).

The new Thamel tourist district turned out to be the preferred choice for adventure seekers wanting to distance themselves—literally—from the seedy environs of Freak Street and its increasingly denigrated hippie denizens.

Thamel: Building the Tourist Bubble

“You know, there are three ways to make money in Nepal. One is the illegal way, the second is politics, and the third is tourism.” KATHMANDU BUSINESSMAN.

In the late 1960s Karna Sakya was a young forester working for the government of Nepal and trying to build a career in a bureaucracy where he had no family connections and little prospect of advancement. While an MA student in Australia Sakya had traveled about, staying in youth hostels where he came to appreciate a lodging experience that combined spartan simplicity and cleanliness with a low-key but helpful management style. Sensing that his career was going nowhere in Nepal, in 1969 Sakya quit his job, consulted with family friends who owned the Oriental Lodge in Freak Street for tips on hotel design, and began converting his family home—an old minor Rana palace on the outskirts of Kathmandu that his father had purchased—into a “guest house” (Sakya 2009). “From Australia I knew that concept very well,” said Sakya. “But my job, I quit purely out of frustration.” In 1970 Sakya opened the Kathmandu Guest House (KGH) in Thamel, a quiet, sparsely populated neighborhood of scattered houses, cattle sheds, and open land on the northern edge of town.

Unlike the lodge owners of the Pig/Pie Alley and Freak Street areas, Karna Sakya had lived abroad and literally understood where the young tourists flocking to Kathmandu were coming from. He understood the kinds of facilities, standards, services, and management styles that students and other budget travelers were accustomed to at home, and what they were willing to pay for them. He also reasoned that whereas budget tourists might be *willing* to stay in Freak Street in cramped, often unsanitary conditions, given the *choice* many would pay a bit more for a larger,

quieter, cleaner room with a hot shower, even if it wasn't in the heart of the old city.

Presciently, Sakya also gambled that Freak Street's radical countercultural ethos was a flash in the pan and not something to build a tourism industry around. "I knew from the very beginning that that place was going to have a natural death. Because they banked on hippieism: hippieism is a cult and it had to go. And it went. Then there were no hippies anymore." Intent on nothing but hanging with the scene and saving money, hippies may have tolerated a tiny cheap room with flimsy plywood walls. But, Sakya believed, "no sensible man, no man could really stay, let's say husband and wife, in a room where every sound could be heard on the other side [of the wall]!" By contrast, the Kathmandu Guest House took advantage of the spacious old building it occupied to offer sizable rooms with solid walls and real furniture. Aiming to be the antithesis of Freak Street, Sakya not only rejected hippie standards but hippies themselves:

I gave *strict* instructions to my staff. There was a definition of hippies in my hotel. The one who doesn't come with shoes. The one who shows his buttocks—you know, sometimes we see the jeans with holes. The man who has no respect for his own body cannot be respected by other people. And the man who never washes, and has weird kind of things [motions with his hands depicting long, filthy, knotted hair]. So that kind of three characters, we never put them up from the beginning.

Sakya's experiences abroad inspired his management style. Guest rooms were clean at check-in but after that guests were provided with a broom and dustpan with which to clean up after themselves. Clean sheets and towels were available every day but it was up to guests to change them. The staff was not allowed to do these things, nor to "lick the feet of the tourists, like they do in India." Sakya knew that staff who behaved like "sycophants" only made guests uncomfortable. Rather, he instructed his staff to address guests in the same way that they were addressed. If a guest used the first name in addressing a staff person, then it was reciprocated; if last name, the same. "In any hotel if they call you by first name, then you will feel really close to that place. This is the instruction I had started from the very beginning. And it really worked. It *really* worked."

At twenty rupees (less than three US dollars) per night, a stay at the Kathmandu Guest House was four or five times more expensive than the cheapest dives in the old city but for that price one got an attached bath and clean sheets. In its first few years the KGH was slow to catch on. Its location—a fifteen-minute walk from Durbar Square—didn't appeal to those who reveled in the hippie scene or medieval shabbiness of the old

“Were it not for Karna Sakya, Thamel wouldn’t be here.”

—THAMEL BUSINESSMAN

city. But from the beginning there were those looking for alternatives to Freak Street. American Peace Corps volunteers (and their British and German counterparts) on break from rural assignments began patronizing the KGH as did older budget tourists and those looking for a more relaxed, quiet, homelike atmosphere. “After one or two years I had a very good relationship with the Peace Corps volunteers with whom I had lots of friends,” remembered Sakya. “You know they really helped me a lot and I should always thank the Peace Corps volunteer people.”

The Kathmandu Guest House’s peripheral location and Western management style proved to be keys to the enduring success of both the KGH and Thamel more broadly. Arguably Sakya was the first to bring what Tim Edensor (1998) has called “enclavic space” or what Dennis Judd (1999) has called the “tourist bubble” into the budget tourism sector. These concepts point to the practice of intentionally creating spaces for visitors that approximate conditions from their home countries—from clean sheets and hot showers to hygienic food and concentrated shopping options—even if these conditions are vastly different from those of the local population. Though five-star hotels like the Soaltee and Annapurna had first brought the tourist bubble to Nepal five years earlier, it was Karna Sakya that brought a version of the experience to the budget tourism market.

Unlike lodges in the Maruhiti and Freak Street tourist districts, Sakya’s Guest House was the first budget establishment that intentionally approximated Western standards and conditions. From this comfortable, familiar place one could make forays into the exotic and alien, then return to swap adventure tales with fellow foreigners. If hippie-era travelers were deeply invested in the idea of living like the locals (whether by ethical impulse or impecunious habit), then by the 1970s adventure tourists arriving by air and on limited schedules were much less so. They were paying good money for a holiday in Nepal and wanted value, meaning some version of the comforts of home. Increasingly Nepal was less a destination than a backdrop for a packaged adventure. Karna Sakya built a tourist bubble on the northern outskirts of Kathmandu and then watched as it swelled into the crowded, pulsating adventure tourist enclave of Thamel.

The keys to understanding Thamel’s rise are space and capital. In theory Karna Sakya’s down-market version of the tourist bubble could

“At that time the *only* thing in Thamel was the Kathmandu Guest House. I remember walking there and, I mean, it was almost rural. There were some old Rana palaces scattered about and I remember the bougainvillea being so lush and just growing up over everything and you could just go and walk down through the fields. It was glorious.”

—KGH GUEST, EARLY 1970s

have happened on Freak Street. But it would have required leveling old buildings and combining adjacent properties to put up new, more commodious lodges—something virtually impossible in the old, densely packed Newar neighborhoods. Few people were willing to sell and if they were, the prices were sky high. By contrast, Thamel had plenty of vacant land that was (initially) very cheap; it was a clean slate on which to sketch out a whole new approach to tourist services.

The literal rise of a new tourist district from the scrubland north of the old city was also about a new kind of business. Whereas the old tourist lodges and restaurants of Maruhiti and Freak Street were typically family owned and involved relatively little capital investment, Thamel businesses were very different. Karna Sakya’s KGH may have been a renovated family building but most of the other new hotels and restaurants that followed were relatively large-scale and *capital-intensive* new constructions. Gone was the old family property model where ownership was often ambiguous and contentious. And unlike the new five-star hotels whose royal and/or Rana owners could evade many of the real costs and risks involved in running a tourism enterprise (see chapter 4), Thamel businesses were driven by clear-eyed considerations of risk and return on investment. From the start they were more or less corporate entities (whether group or privately owned) that represented intentional, relatively large-scale capital investment in a new, still risky business sector. The new Thamel businesses represented the first real capitalization of the tourism market in Nepal (apart from the early five-star hotels financed by international agencies or capital amassed from centuries of feudal rule). With the rise of Thamel we see the arrival of tourism as a major indigenous business sector (Morimoto 2007:352).

Like the “Field of Dreams,” the success of the Kathmandu Guest House proved that “if you build it, *tourists* will come.” One tourist in 1973 spoke for many who were making the shift to Thamel. From the Kathmandu airport, he reports,

you found an old Ambassador taxi—there were no other vehicles at all—which without asking drove you directly to the famous Freak Street. This consisted of maybe ten lousy hotels with dismal tenement rooms in which the inmates dismally sat all day, spitting out of the window. You needed an umbrella to get down Freak Street.

Kathmandu was a living medieval city of great beauty, famous for the warmth of its welcome and western-style eateries. They weren't any good. People were always getting sick. . . . The city was quite literally becoming a shithouse, because people had no toilets, they didn't shit in their own back yard: they went out on the street.

Kathmandu was rapidly running out of space. The foreigner scene moved *en masse* across to Thamel, an otherwise unvisited quarter on the outskirts of the city. (Tomory 1996:191–92)

By around 1973 business was booming at the KGH, and other tourist-related businesses were springing up left and right in Thamel. By the late 1970s the area was bristling with curio shops, used book stores, trekking agencies and shops renting gear, travel agencies, T-shirt shops and carpet stores, and—above all—new restaurants and lodges, many of them transplants from the Freak Street area where, one by one, people pulled up stakes and invested in Thamel.

One example of this larger trend is KC's Restaurant, one of the earliest, most iconic continuously operating businesses in Thamel. In 1966 an American expat working in Kathmandu needed a kitchen boy to help around the house and hired Ram Gopal KC, a “neighborhood kid” he had met hanging out on the street. The American taught KC how to cook and bake things like pancakes and bread, how to wash vegetables, boil water for drinking, and generally keep a hygienic kitchen. A few years later KC took a job with the Nepal Merchant Marine, a short-lived government initiative that operated several aging cargo ships on the high seas. Having worked with foreigners, Ram Gopal KC was one of several Nepalis hired to assist the otherwise Norwegian crew. For several years he traveled the world visiting ports where he came to understand how foreigners lived and what they expected in a restaurant and bar. When the Merchant Marine folded in the early 1970s, Ram Gopal KC returned to Kathmandu and took a job as cook in the restaurant attached to the venerable GC Lodge near Freak Street. KC eventually bought land in Thamel and in September 1976 opened a new restaurant a stone's throw from the gates of the Kathmandu Guest House. KC astutely catered to health-conscious yuppie adventurers, serving up unusual and original dishes like savory pumpkin pie, brown rice with tofu and stir-fried vegetables, baked potatoes and safe-to-eat green salads. Sporting long hair and a beard, KC interacted easily with his clientele who found in him someone “who seems to know exactly what

the westerners want” (Raj 1985:84). KC’s Restaurant has been a pillar of the Thamel business scene ever since.

The community most commonly associated with Thamel businesses in the Nepali popular imagination are Manangis—an ethnically Tibetan group originally from the high Manang Valley in north central Nepal. Manangi merchants were active in trans-Himalayan commerce for centuries before the Chinese occupation of Tibet forced them to extend their trading networks farther south and eventually into Southeast and East Asia. Special trading rights granted by Nepal’s royal family to the Manangi community allowed individual families to amass huge personal fortunes (van Spengen 1987, 2000; Watkins 1996; Rogers 2004). Their wealth, combined with their Tibetan ethnic heritage (looked down upon by most caste Hindus), made the Manangi community the object of envy and derision by many Nepalis. Allegations of ill-gotten gain through “smuggling” and other illegal activities are not without basis but, overall, the Manangi community’s bad reputation in Kathmandu stems mainly from the threat they pose to traditional forms of Nepali privilege and capital.

The Thamel tourist trade turned out to be an ideal outlet for Manangi capital investment beginning in the 1970s. Manangi business families bought up land, built modern hotels and restaurants, and soon became a dominant presence in the adventure/budget tourist market. Today locals refer to certain powerful Manangi businessmen as the “*rajas of Thamel*” and accuse them of using mafia-like tactics to maintain power and intimidate contenders. The Manangi community in Thamel is a classic example of a cash-rich but socially stigmatized community using the capitalist “free market” as a means of transcending traditional economic patterns that had historically excluded them.

More important than charting Thamel’s rise in any detailed way is understanding the general tourism ethos that Thamel exemplified. Paralleling the Nepali state’s own new awareness of its image in the eyes of foreign tourists, Thamel businesses went all out to capitalize on fantasies that tourists brought with them to Nepal. Almost invariably Thamel business names included words like “paradise,” “Shangri-La,” or “Tibetan.” Pico Iyer noted how Thamel businesses had “cashed in on being the closest place on earth to the remotest place on earth. . . . [I]t knew exactly how to sell itself as a wholesale, second hand Tibet” (1988:82–83). Similarly, another visitor noted how Thamel promoters “are well aware that most tourists come for the ‘legend’ of Kathmandu, and they nurture this legend wonderfully” (Pilkington 1985:23). Thamel represents the coming-of-age of a Nepali awareness of its most precious but delicate tourism assets: “legends” nurtured by centuries of mystifying representa-

tions of the Himalayas transported to Nepal by generation after generation of visitors.

Thamel also represents the perfecting of a tourism strategy pioneered by entrepreneurs like Bishnu Shahi whose original pie shop helped turn Kathmandu into a refuge for hungry world travelers. The basic lesson was offer tourists what they want and they'll buy it from you. Karna Sakya's Kathmandu Guest House applied this lesson to the hotel trade and many others followed. But it was Thamel restaurateurs who took the art of accommodation to new levels offering up a "smorgasbord" of menus "which could easily have put the United Nations cafeteria to shame" (Iyer 1988:87). One visitor acknowledged sheepishly, after experiencing the scenery, temples, and people of Nepal, "I have to admit that my main memory is of pizza. . . . Kathmandu's entrepreneurs have discovered that the way to the hearts of their visitors is through their stomachs" (Pilkington 1985:26). Like the Maruhiti and Freak Street tourist enclaves before it, Thamel excelled at "adapting to Western tastes and fashions with unparalleled swiftness and skill" (Iyer 1988:87).

But perhaps the ultimate secret of Thamel's success was a fortuitous convergence of mutually accommodating parties. If Nepali entrepreneurs were eager to accommodate tourists, tourists were (usually) equally willing to accept what was offered, even if it wasn't quite like home. That the yak cheese on the pizza was a bit pungent mattered less than that there *was* pizza. The romantic "legends" of Nepal that people carried with them disposed them to *like* Nepal and overlook its discomforts and shortcomings. Time and again tourists complained about Kathmandu's garbage, dangerous water, and bad air before concluding that Nepal's mystical marvels and medieval charms made it a "storybook kingdom" (e.g., Hutchison 1989:34). Tourists brought an incredible amount of long-sedimented, predisposed good will that transformed what was, in objective terms, just another squalid Third World capital into a blissful Shangri-La with pie. With Nepali entrepreneurs eager to please, and tourists eager to *be pleased*, both parties met in the middle ground of accommodation. The Thamel tourist bubble allowed tourists to nurture their dreams of Nepal and leave with them intact.

Conclusion: To See Adventurous Places

The rise of Thamel and adventure tourism didn't so much mark the end of earlier Kathmandu tourism eras as their rebirth as adventure excursions. From the 1980s onward a trip to "Hippie Nepal" was almost like a trip to

Everest Base Camp or Chitwan. Hippie wannabes still came sporting tie-die and looking for Freak Street—now reconstituted as Memory Lane. For those without the proper attire, Kathmandu shops offer a never-ending supply of baggy pants, peasant blouses, and mirror-work vests that can turn just about anyone into a hippie lookalike (Hepburn 2000). (One Thamel lodge owner laughed as he described troops of Japanese tourists who arrive conservatively dressed but soon morph into “**hippies types**” wearing loose pajama style pants and carrying shoulder bags.) Once properly attired, a few afternoons spent smoking hashish (still readily available) in a Freak Street restaurant or hanging out on the temple steps in Durbar Square are usually enough to allow tourists to find the hippie Nepal they came looking for.

With enough mental labor tourists of a certain age could even conjure up nostalgic traces of Nepal tourism’s “golden age” in the 1950s and 1960s when jet-setting foreigners came to the Royal Hotel to relive colonial fantasies of maharajas, palaces, and Oriental splendor. Inspired by tales of abominable snowman hunts he had read about in his youth, in the mid-1980s Robert Hutchison arrived in Kathmandu eager to find a dream Nepal that had presumably died out. But walking about the city, Hutchison enthused how

in spite of its many failings . . . modern Kathmandu retains a colonial quaintness, a whiff of the British Raj. The King and Queen live in an art-deco pagoda-style palace. . . . Here and there are hidden treasures of neo-classical architecture, for the most part the dilapidated palaces of the Ranas . . . a little forlorn, like an Oriental fairytale that has become faded with the passage of time. (1989:35)

That Nepal was never part of the British Raj didn’t prevent Hutchison from mentally inhabiting the “Oriental fairytale” in which it did.

The new adventure tourists came to Nepal intent on finding their own mass-mediated image-memories. But increasingly these dream Nepals centered less on Oriental fantasies than around visions of high mountains and high adventure. At least since the 1920s Himalayan mountaineering exploits had focused the world’s attention on Nepal and trekkers are almost invariably drawn there by the desire to experience at least some small part of that drama. One fascinating result of survey research done by Nepali social scientist Hari Prasad Shrestha (2000) is that even though most tourists said that they had *not* come to Nepal to “seek real adventure,” almost all of them ranked “like to travel to adventurous places” very highly! Or, in Shrestha’s words, “the primary attraction may not be adventure. But visitors from all nations seemed to come to *see adventurous*

places" (2000:186, my italics). This desire not to "seek real adventure" but instead to "see adventurous places" seems to capture the essence of adventure tourism in Nepal.

Not surprisingly the Nepal trekking industry has, from the beginning, fed off of media coverage in the tourist homelands. Most notably the Everest Base Camp trek (that literally ends where the "real adventure" begins) has continued to grow in popularity as Everest mountaineering continues to attract publicity. One example of this media effect was the virtual "stampede of . . . trekkers" (Rogers 2007:225) to Base Camp in the late 1990s following Jon Krakauer's famous book *Into Thin Air* and the IMAX movie *Everest*, both of which documented the 1996 disaster on Everest in which five members of a commercially guided climbing party died. Far from dampening people's desires to climb dangerous mountains, accounts like Krakauer's seem only to have multiplied the number of wealthy tourists willing to pay large sums to be guided (and in some cases almost carried) to the top of Everest. In what has been called "explornography" (Ortner 1999:282), the line between "adventure tourism" and real mountaineering is blurring as expeditions that were once limited to hard-core, highly skilled, experienced climbers are now open to people with big bank accounts and reasonable fitness. One day during the 2012 spring climbing season, professional climber Ralf Dujmovits photographed an incredible "human snake" of six hundred "hobby climbers" waiting in line on the final ascent path to the Everest summit and warned of an impending tragedy (Connolly 2012). These "hobby climbers" prove that—with enough money to pay for other people's labor and expertise (and a constant supply of bottled oxygen)—trekkers can buy their way to the top of the world. Perhaps Nepal tourism has come full circle from the days when jet-setting elites treated Kathmandu as an exclusive trophy destination to the über-chic peak-bagging exploits of their great grandchildren.

The Nepal government's decision to promote trekking tourism has had other unforeseen moneymaking consequences. By downplaying the country as a traditional sightseeing tour destination and rebranding it an adventure land, Nepal became more than just another place to tick off on one's bucket list. Instead, one good adventure quickly invited another and Nepal now attracts amazingly high numbers of repeat visitors. The UK-based trekking company Himalayan Kingdom reports that 60 percent of its clients are repeat visitors to Nepal, or what Beedie calls "serial adventure tourists" (2003:235). Another survey (H. P. Shrestha 2000:174) found that an amazing 40 percent of *general* Nepal tourist arrivals (not limited to trekkers) were repeat visitors including a full 25 percent who had visited the

country *four times or more*.¹² Trekking junkies return repeatedly, intent on securing another endorphin-soaked adventure fix.

As the gateway to its fabled trekking hinterlands, Thamel has played a key role in Nepal's rebirth as an adventure destination. In fact, Thamel's emergence in the 1970s represents the coming of age of Nepal tourism, or perhaps its loss of innocence. Thamel is a monument to Nepal's discovery of tourism, and of itself as a tourism "legend." Tourists had discovered Nepal decades earlier but when Nepali entrepreneurs finally realized the economic potential of tourism, and its symbolic underpinnings, they grabbed the fantasies that tourists brought with them, affixed prices to them, and skillfully sold tourists what they had come looking for. Pico Iyer compares the shift from Freak Street to Thamel to the life trajectory of "any American dropout from the sixties: shedding its ragged threads, cleaning up its act, going through business school, and settling down to a good steady income" (1988:102). If Freak Street had been a lark, Thamel meant getting down to business, a business that transformed tourists from foreign curiosities into extractive resources.

12. The same survey found that 85 percent of visitors to Nepal are college graduates, almost 75 percent have some graduate-level education, and an amazing 12 percent have PhDs (H. P. Shrestha 2000:174).

Imbibing Eastern Wisdom: Nepal as Dharma Destination

How good for the mental health of modern youth to imbibe a little Eastern wisdom. MICHAEL HOLLINGSHEAD

While chapter 1 tracked the thirst for Oriental spiritual nourishment from the nineteenth century, linking it to a growing sense of alienation and longing to re-enchant a world thoroughly stripped of meaning by modern rationalism, this final chapter explores the history of dharma tourism in Nepal, as well as the Western longings for Eastern wisdom that inspired it. From the spread of Theosophy, to widespread fascination with Tibet, to waves of curiosity about Hinduism and Buddhism, interest in “Eastern wisdom” ebbs and flows as countercultural forces advance or retreat in Western popular culture. Here I focus mainly on the countercultural youth movements of the 1960s and 1970s which launched unprecedented numbers of “seekers,” “dharma bums,” and pilgrims onto the Road to Kathmandu.

The epigraph above offers a clue as to what these dharma pilgrims were seeking. Hollingshead’s claim that Eastern wisdom is good for the “mental health” of modern youth harkens back to a stream of thought within Western psychology that, at least since Jung, has constituted the East as a cure to the ailments of Western modernity. This chapter explores some links between Western ideas of the self and dharma tourism. The early twentieth century’s conception

of the “self” as a secular (seemingly scientific) alternative to more religious notions of soul or spirit (and its naturalization within Western folk epistemology, psychotherapeutics, and social science), has led to a growing fascination with the project of “self-fashioning.” This in turn has inspired entire industries aimed at self-help, self-transformation, self-healing, and—ultimately—meditation and self-liberation. It is within this context that I identify dharma tourism as a species of adventure tourism. Like other adventure tourists, dharma types come to Nepal seeking *expert* (spiritual) *guidance* in an *exotic* (fabled, god-filled, mysterious) *landscape*—and *pay* for the privilege. In lieu of trekking guides and mountain experiences, they seek Lamas and meditation retreats. Religion, especially Tibetan Buddhism, has become a fundamental part of Nepal’s tourism “brand” even if it is a “product” that derives as much from the Western imagination as from any local provenance.

“Nepal Is a Buddhist Country”

Historically the Kathmandu Valley’s main religious currents have been Hinduism and Buddhism, the two intermingling in remarkably eclectic ways. Many of the valley’s oldest religious sites include both Hindu and Buddhist shrines with worshipers moving seamlessly from one to the next. Among Kathmandu Newars this mixing has produced such seeming anomalies as Shiva-lingams¹ capped with images of the Buddha, and a strictly hierarchized Buddhist caste system (Gellner and Quigley 1995), just like that of their Hindu neighbors.

Whereas Hindus and Buddhists are relatively equally distributed in the Kathmandu Valley, nationwide Nepal is overwhelmingly Hindu with a state leadership that was historically, sometimes militantly, Hindu. At least since Nepal’s unification in the eighteenth century, royal patronage of Hinduism has been an important part of the Nepali state’s identity allowing it to morally distinguish itself from the Mughals, British India, and modern (officially) secular India. As the world’s only Hindu monarchy, Nepal and its Shah kings served as a symbolic rallying point for Hindu nationalists worldwide (Hausner 2007)—until the monarchy’s final dissolution in 2008 following the Maoist Civil War.

Given its overt identification *as* a Hindu state, it is ironic that most Westerners associate Nepal with Buddhism. Countless tourists have described Nepal as “a small Buddhist country in the Himalayas.” This mis-

1. A lingam is the phallic-shaped object associated with Shaivite devotional practices.



18 Buddhist Shiva lingams, Kathmandu Durbar Square. Photo by Mark Liechty.

taken identity probably stems at least in part from Nepal's fame within Orientalist scholarship as home to a kind of fossilized ancient form of Buddhism—a preoccupation that has overshadowed Nepal's more garden-variety Hinduism. In the Tantric Buddhism practiced by Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, Victorian-era scholars found (or imagined they found) a living example of antique practices that had long since died out in the ancient Buddhist heartland of (what is now) north India. By the mid- to late twentieth century this reputation, and the fact that the famously *still*-Buddhist Tibet was firmly closed, led tourists to shift their Buddhist longings to Nepal.

Nepal's Buddhists had been relatively isolated from other Buddhist groups for millennia before, in the early twentieth century, sub-nationalist political stirrings among Kathmandu Newars spawned revival and reform movements that led some in the community to Theravada Buddhism (LeVine and Gellner 2007). With its emphasis on personal study of the Buddha's life, monasticism, and the authority of monastic leaders, Theravada claimed to be a more rational, authentic, or pure form of Buddhism compared with Tantric practices that are highly esoteric, mystical, and (at times) vaguely sinister (including sexual imagery, demons, and so on). By

the 1930s reform-minded Buddhists in the Kathmandu Valley had forged ties with Theravadins in Burma and Sri Lanka and established a Theravada monastery at Swayambhu, the ancient Buddhist/Hindu hilltop shrine to the west of Kathmandu.

Nepalis have deep historical ties with Tibetan Buddhism. For millennia Nepali Buddhist merchant families controlled much of the trans-Himalayan trade between Lhasa and the Indian subcontinent, with Kathmandu serving as a principal entrepôt. These trade routes served as avenues for Buddhist monks who, along with Bhrikuti Devi—the seventh-century Nepali Buddhist princess who converted her husband, Tibetan king Songtsan Gampo—are among those credited with bringing Buddhism to Tibet. Tibet’s most ancient Buddhist structure, Lhasa’s Jokhang Temple, was originally built by Licchavi-era Nepali craftsmen and housed devotional images brought to Tibet by Bhrikuti (Gutschow 2011, 1:189). Over the centuries Nepali merchants residing in Lhasa formed close ties with emerging Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhist sects whom they patronized and eventually helped to establish institutions in the Kathmandu Valley at places like Swayambhu. In turn, Swayambhu, along with the massive stupa at Bodhanath east of Kathmandu, became important pilgrimage sites for Tibetan Buddhists.

Thus a uniquely Newar Tantric Buddhism, various schools of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, and the more recently introduced Theravada Buddhism were all present in the Kathmandu Valley before the first Western dharma seekers arrived. These, along with the nationally dominant Hindu Vaishnavite traditions associated with Nepal’s royal family and the popular Hindu Shaivite traditions centered on the Kathmandu Valley’s ancient Pashupatinath temple, made Kathmandu a veritable smorgasbord for dharma tourists. What is fascinating is how the religious Nepal that tourists sought changed over time as the fashions or tastes for “Eastern wisdom” changed in the West.

Swayambhu and Early Buddhist Tourists

Arriving in Kathmandu in April 1954, Karl and Ingrid Wagner were probably Nepal’s first dharma tourists, though by no means the first Westerners drawn to South Asia (or even the Himalayan region) to pursue interests in Eastern religion. From holiday dabblers to deeply committed individuals who devoted decades to study, these pioneering souls paved the way for the unprecedented wave of dharma travelers who descended on South Asia during the post-World War II travel boom (see chapter 1). No doubt

seekers would have come to Nepal sooner had the country not been closed to foreigners before 1951.

Karl Heinz Wagner is an extraordinary character whose story we know thanks to the remarkable cooperatively written auto/biography he produced with Rachel Kellet (Sugata and Kellett 2004). Born in Germany in 1911, the illegitimate son of an unknown father and Swedish-German mother, Wagner came of age in Nazi Germany where his “bastard” identity and non-German parentage made him an outsider. A Jewish school friend introduced Wagner to the writings of Gandhi which convinced him to become a pacifist and sparked his lifelong interest in South Asia. During the Depression Wagner left home and traveled around Europe sleeping in barns and doing odd jobs rather than standing in endless labor queues at home, or, worse, joining the Nazis for food. In 1943 he escaped to Norway where he was arrested and spent the rest of the war in prison.

After the war Wagner settled in his mother’s native Sweden where he married Ingrid (a Swede) and together followed their shared countercultural instincts to Theosophy. Describing himself as “150% Theosophist” (Sugata and Kellett 2004:269) Wagner reveled in a philosophy that upheld his strong anti-Christian, anti-Western antipathies. Via Theosophy Wagner soon found the works of Lama Angarika Govinda (Ernst Lothar Hoffman), the German Theosophist who had traveled to India in the 1930s where he claims to have been ordained a monk in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition (see chapter 1). Inspired by Theosophy and a growing fixation on Buddhism, in 1953 Karl and Ingrid Wagner traveled overland to India.

In India they took up residence at Sarnath, the great Buddhist pilgrimage site near Banaras, as guests of the Theravadin Mahabodhi Society. There Wagner met a young Nepali monk (reading a book by Lenin which sparked their initial conversation!) who invited Karl and Ingrid to come to Kathmandu to study under his master, the pioneering Newar Theravadin abbot, Amritananda. Intrigued, Karl and Ingrid accepted the invitation and flew into Kathmandu in April 1954 where they lived in Ananda Kuti, Amritananda’s Theravadin monastery on the Swayambhu hill. Wagner studied but also spent time wandering the Kathmandu Valley photographing religious sites, festivals, and events (including King Tribhuvan’s death rites at Pashupatinath in 1955). He was also a popular teacher at the school attached to Ananda Kuti where he taught art classes to local school children.

In June 1955 Amritananda ordained Ingrid Wagner as a Theravada Buddhist nun, making her the first Westerner to be invested in Nepal. (Shortly thereafter Ingrid, now Amita Nisatta, returned to Stockholm where she

“This Sugata, we called him Wagner. He used to teach us drawing and painting. . . . He would come [to class] with a box made of paper, something he had made himself. Then he would ask us to draw it for perspective. In his leisure time he used to paint from life, people working and that kind of thing. And he was also a good photographer. My family still has some of his photos.”

—FORMER NEPALI STUDENT OF SUGATA

amicably divorced Wagner, retained her vows, and spent her life intrepidly teaching and promoting Buddhism until her death in 2001.) In November 1955 Karl followed Ingrid’s lead, taking ordination from Amritananda and adopting the name Sugata. Sugata remained in Kathmandu studying what he could but because he spoke no South Asian languages (in fact he learned English from Amritananda and fellow monks!), in January 1957 he left Nepal, partly because Amita (Ingrid) told him there was a demand for Buddhist teachers in Europe. Sugata returned home in full monk’s habit and for several years traveled all over Europe giving illustrated lectures (using the thousands of slides he’d shot) on India, Nepal, and Buddhism. In the late 1960s, exhausted by the stares and questions his monk’s robes invited, Sugata broke his vows and remarried though he kept his Buddhist name and identity. Sugata returned to Nepal several times including in 2001 for a trek to Muktinath to celebrate his ninetieth birthday.

In many ways Karl and Ingrid Wagner’s path to Kathmandu was unique. In addition to being the first dharma tourists, their association with Theravada Buddhism in Nepal turns out to be somewhat anomalous. On the one hand it is significant that Nepali Theravadins were traveling to places like Sarnath in the 1950s where they could meet and invite people like the Wagners. On the other hand Newar Buddhism (in any of its forms) has never had an evangelical bent. The Newar abbot Amritananda welcomed the Wagners but few if any Westerners followed in their Theravadin footsteps. Sugata’s catholic tastes in Eastern religion were also unusual by the standards of today’s dharma seekers who tend to be relatively (some zealously) committed to a *particular* religious tradition. Today it seems incongruous that Sugata, an ordained Buddhist monk, not only consorted with Hindu holy men whom he encountered in the Kathmandu Valley, but actually identified one as his principle guru—the Shivapuri Baba, a locally famous Hindu yogi, then reputed to be almost 130 years old (Bennett 2006 [1965]).

I recognized him from the beginning as someone I had been awaiting. I began going to see him regularly, making it a holy duty to go. . . . On the way I would formulate my many questions, but he would invariably give me the answers, even before I had asked them, as soon as I arrived. (Sugata and Kellett 2004:309–10)

Karl and Ingrid Wagner's residence at Swayambhu ended in the mid-1950s but with them commenced a small but continuous presence of Western seekers that grew slowly through the 1960s and 1970s (Stablein 1985, 2003). A few of these people spent years studying languages, translating texts, and mastering esoteric knowledge systems. But many more seem to have used religion as a kind of smoke screen behind which to indulge their interests in mind-altering substances. Michael Hollingshead, a Swayambhu area resident, seems to exemplify this kind of seeker: his florid prose—full of jumbled allusions to poorly grasped Asian philosophy—suggests a mind equally intrigued by occult Oriental mysticism and addled by a lifetime of LSD and hashish use. The resulting pan-Asian religious stew bore few traces of anything actually learned in Asia and tasted distinctly of Orientalist fantasies brought from home.

But if the Wagners are unique, they are also harbingers of the flood of dharma tourists who followed. This time, however, their focus would clearly be on Tibetan Buddhism as Western seekers followed Tibetan refugees to the new Buddhist institutions springing up around the Bodhanath stupa where a variety of Tibetan religious orders were busy trying to regroup in exile.

Religion on the Road: From Hinduism to Buddhism

By the 1960s the West's interest in "Eastern religion" had, for at least a century, been a barometer of dissent, rising and falling in parallel with the level of countercultural angst. What made the post-World War II baby boom's fixation on Eastern spirituality different from earlier waves was not just its intensity, but the fact that economics and technology for the first time made it possible for people en masse to follow Hermann Hesse on their own "Journeys to the East." As Nixon-era crackdowns (and analogous trends elsewhere) knocked much of the wind out of 1960s protest movements, huge numbers of disaffected youth shifted their priorities from *social* transformation to *personal* transformation and headed East for a change of scene and of self.

That interest in Eastern wisdom was often as much about *rebell*ing as about *seeking* helps explain the eclectic, non-discriminating nature of

so many hippie-era spiritual quests. Journeys into Eastern religion were often more about thumbing one's nose at a hypocritical Judeo-Christian upbringing than about some passionate desire for spiritual meaning. In this light, following a guru or lama was an act of political/cultural defiance as well as an act of religious devotion. In South Asia the religion/rebellion craze peaked in the early 1970s (Narayan 2007:125) as hundreds of thousands of Western youth circulated between ashrams, monasteries, and meditation retreats. With South Asian religious figures specifically catering to Western youth, seekers discovered entire communities made up of people just like themselves. Even better, far from declaring War on Drugs, some of these Eastern traditions actually celebrated "drug" use, such as Shaivite Hinduism's association with cannabis. Moreover, some popular Hindu gurus like Bhagwan Rajneesh (a.k.a. Osho) (in)famously advocated sexual liberation, arguing that sex was not a sin but something to be celebrated, often. For a generation intent on rebellion, these versions of Eastern religion were not a hard sell.

Western interest in Hindu gurus and ashrams reached unprecedented levels during this period but the phenomenon itself wasn't new. In 1890 Theosophy's founders Madam Blavatsky and Coronel Olcott established the first modern ashram at the society's world headquarters at Adyar just outside of Madras (now Chennai) in southern India. With resident devotees offering spiritual instruction (in English) to foreign visitors, Adyar was just the first of many Theosophical Society ashrams around India, a significant moneymaker for the society, and "a business model for enterprising gurus" elsewhere in India looking to cash in on Western fascination with Hinduism (Baker 2008:95). An early example was the Sri Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950) ashram at Tiruvannamalai in Tamilnadu, which became a magnet for foreigners including Paul Brunton who made it famous in his book *A Search in Secret India* (1934). Having read Brunton, Somerset Maugham visited the ashram in 1938 and memorialized it and Ramana Maharshi in his 1944 novel *The Razor's Edge*.

The Indian guru most often credited with spurring the West's interest in Hinduism is Swami Vivekananda, the Bengali philosopher monk who represented India and Hinduism at the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago. There he wowed audiences with his erudition, portraying ancient Vedantic Hinduism and yoga as rational, quasi-scientific, moral endeavors intrinsically superior to Christianity. Tailored to tap into the strong current of antimodernist, anti-Christian radicalism of the time, Vivekananda's message was both inspired by Theosophy's massive popularity and (not surprisingly) "remarkably similar to what is cobbled together in Theosophy" (van der Veer 2001:74). For most of the nineteenth

century American interest in Hinduism and Buddhism had been limited to intellectual circles like the Transcendentalists (Hodder 2003) or Buddhist social dissenters (Tweed 1992). But with the ground prepared by the mystical and occult leanings of Theosophical Orientalism, Swami Vivekananda's message reached a broader, more popular audience. By the early twentieth century, though its appeal was still limited, Eastern religion was beginning to take on the radical chic cachet that caught the attention of mass culture tastemakers.

Meher Baba was probably the first Indian guru to be embraced by Hollywood stars and Western socialites. Born Merwan Sheriar Irani (1894–1969) into a Parsi Indian family, Meher Baba espoused an eclectic mix of ideas derived from Sufism, Vedanta, and Christianity. In 1925 he took a vow of silence (communicating only with gestures and an alphabet board), which only amplified his exotic appeal to his trendy followers. In the early 1930s Meher Baba sailed for Europe and the US where, in a press statement, he described his visit as part of a “new crusade . . . to break down all religious barriers and destroy America’s materialism and amalgamate all creeds into a common element of love” (Mills 1932). In the US Meher Baba attracted widespread media coverage (*Time* 1932a, 1932b) and was feted by wealthy socialites and movie stars including Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, Gary Cooper, Boris Karloff, and Maurice Chevalier. In the 1950s Meher Baba declared himself an avatar (incarnation of god) and dictated his major work *God Speaks* (first published in 1955). This book became a foundational text for a new generation of Beat-era and hippie seekers including Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, and other residents of the Millbrook commune in the 1960s (Hollingshead 1973:109).

Thus by the 1960s the lucrative path to pop guru-dom was already well-trodden when a new generation of middle-class Indian holy men began courting countercultural Western youth, establishing international ashram empires, and becoming household names in the West. With its popularity already building, the Beatles’ visit to India in February 1968 helped throw the guru phenomenon into overdrive. John, Paul, George, and Ringo visited the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s (1917–2008) north Indian ashram (along with a raft of other pop culture notables including Mick Jagger, the Beach Boys, Marianne Faithful, and Mia Farrow) to study the Maharishi’s (literally) trademark Transcendental Meditation® technique. Tens of thousands of other Western youth flocked to Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh’s ashram near Bombay (and later in Oregon) where he led his acolytes to liberation through a philosophy that stressed sexual freedom and release from personal inhibition. A suave, erudite, former philosophy professor, Rajneesh (1931–1990) acquired a reputation as a “sexy,” “rabble-rousing” “showman”

(Tomory 1996:118) with a gift for sexually liberating attractive female followers, many of whom abruptly left India pregnant, having had their “*chakras* inspected” once too often by their attentive guru (Narayan 2007:135).

A constellation of lesser gurus—including the Neem Karoli Baba (“Maharaj-ji”), Richard Alpert’s guru; Yogananda (whose *Autobiography of a Yogi* was essential reading for seekers); S. N. Goenka (founder of the “Vipassana Meditation” movement); Satya Sai Baba; and Swami Muktananda (“Babaji”)—also established international followings. The closest thing that Nepal had to a cult guru was Swami Ganeshji (1890–1987), or the Ganesh Baba, a successful Indian businessman turned *sannyasin*/renouncer who attracted a sizable Western following. Ganeshji’s mother was Nepali and he sported Nepali-style leggings and the distinctive Nepali cloth cap (*dhaka topi*), along with orange sadhu robes, while holding court across north India and in Kathmandu (Tomory 1996: 34, 91–93, 178). Beyond these gurus were still more swamis, babas, and sadhus of minor repute including even a few Westerners who, after a few years of seeking in India and Nepal, hung out their own shingles and established themselves as gurus in their own rights (e.g. Stablein 1985:50; PAR 8/30/75). The most famous of these was Bhagavan Das, the blond dread-locked sadhu from California who converted former Harvard professor Richard Alpert to Hinduism after their encounter in a Kathmandu noodle shop in 1968 (Alpert 1971; Narayan 2007:130–31).

Between gurus to meet, ashrams and pilgrimage sites to visit, and meditation courses to attend, by the early 1970s India and Nepal offered a rich array of spiritual experiences. Some young tourists emphatically distanced themselves from any kind of religious orientation (PAR 7/24/74) but many more viewed Eastern spirituality as a cultural attraction. One American visitor to Nepal in the early 1970s described how

Hinduism and Buddhism had a kind of cachet. I mean, think about the Beatles, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Transcendental Meditation and all that. So we’d go and see these temples and it was “Wow, Hinduism. Cool. Wow, Buddhism. Cool.” Actually seeing these things as a way of life was so exciting.

In the 1960s and 1970s hordes of youth spent months, even years, wandering the subcontinent attending teachings, ashrams, monasteries, and meditation retreats, some attaching themselves to particular teachers or schools but more often sampling the offerings as widely as possible.²

2. Some of the best published accounts of this wandering seeker lifestyle are Tarnoff 2005; Stablein 1985 and 2003; and Narayan 2007.

As one German woman said, it wasn't about "religion" per se, but about "meditation," and it didn't matter whether it was Hindu, Buddhist, Transcendental, Vipassana, or any other variety (PAR 7/18/75).

Having typically traveled to Nepal via India, when Western seekers arrived in Kathmandu, most were already well-steeped in a Hindu religious ethos. Many of the early dharma tourists came, like Bhagavan Das, decked out in the saffron robes of Hindu renunciators. In October 1974 Nepali travel writer Prakash A. Raj was walking in the countryside east of Kathmandu when he encountered an American named Hank dressed like a sadhu, chanting "Hare Ram," living off of "Shiva prasad" (food offerings to Shiva), and "looking quite hippie." Hank explained that he was a Shaivite and was "trying to get the body to endure as much trouble as possible" (PAR 10/27/74). Terry Tarnoff found many foreigners like Hank hanging out at Pashupatinath, the Shaivite Hindu pilgrimage center near Kathmandu (Tarnoff 2005:349). From hard-core sadhu impersonators to casual pot-heads, Pashupatinath offered foreigners the chance to pass the chillum with willing Indian and Nepali renunciators.

The styles and lifestyles of Shaivite sadhus attracted young foreign men because they seemed to offer access to a genuine, living Hindu community. Because day-to-day Hindu practice in South Asia is so bound up with family and domestic life and with the broader sociology of caste, watching Hinduism was easy for foreigners but taking part in it was another matter altogether. For those aspiring to *become* Hindu, the world-renouncing sadhu sects were a door into a religious community that otherwise treated inquisitive foreigners as curiosities at best, defiling untouchables at worst. Because they officially renounced caste distinctions (and other social conventions) sadhu communities were often quite tolerant of foreigners seeking to join their ranks. Tarnoff remembers how, in 1974,

it felt warm sitting around the *dhuni* [communal fire of a group of sadhus]. I felt connected to the sadhus, to the temple, and even to Shiva. Is this it? Am I on the precipice of something? Is this what I've been looking for? It feels so close, I can nearly reach out and grab it, the answer to all my questions could be right in this circle, I could follow this path. (2005:350)

Sadhus were attractive for other reasons too. Flamboyant, exhibitionist, theatrical holy men,³ Sadhus exemplified what Westerners imagined Eastern spirituality to be: as extreme renunciators, they must be "in the

3. Dubbed "Prick Baba" by foreigners, one Pashupatinath sadhu had a "sixty or seventy pound" rock which, tied to his penis, he would lift and swing around (Tarnoff 2005:348).

Know.” And they smoked dope. Compared to the meek Hindu householders blandly going through the motions of their pujas, ash-smeared, socially contrarian sadhus seemed to be engaged in the same combination of rebellion and seeking that had brought many young people to India in the first place.⁴

The relationship between “drug use” and “religion” deserves special attention in the context of Westerners’ spiritual quests in South Asia. The free use of mind-altering substances (criminalized in the West) was a key part of many Westerners’ larger projects of rebellion (Kapur 1981). The fact that Hinduism seemed to tolerate—perhaps even condone—drug use as part of religious practice was an important part of Hinduism’s appeal. Looking back it’s easy to write off hippie-era religiously motivated drug use as narcissistic self-delusion. But in fact the link between mind-altering substances and religious experience is as old as human culture itself with religious specialists through time and around the world believing to have found portals to other realms through the use of hallucinogens.

One of the by-products of twentieth-century advances in chemistry and pharmacology was the isolation and synthesis of powerful hallucinogens such as LSD and psilocybin. For the counterculturally inclined, hallucinogenic experiences were not just moments of altered brain chemistry, but glimpses of ontological revelation. Ironically, many people who previously had no interest in either religion or the East found themselves setting out on the RTK (looking for Eastern wisdom) following world-shattering experiences with drugs like LSD (Leary 1990:381).

An American who had lived in Kathmandu in the early 1970s (while in his late twenties) described how mind-altering substances launched his vision quest to the East:

I think it got started the first time I took LSD. My perceptions changed on everything. Drugs like that kind of sky-rocket you into another reality, another way of viewing things, a different perception. . . . You know you get these very clear light images, clear visions, or perceptions, or insights into things. One of them was “What are we *doing* here on this planet?” I remember that was a big one. I remember walking the beaches of [. . .] before I left and just [asking] “Who are we? Where are we going? What’s the purpose here?” That kind of thing. And I *never* thought about those kinds of things before [LSD].

4. For Westerners, the lure of the Asian renunciant lifestyle didn’t originate in the hippie era. William Dalrymple describes Britons who became Muslim or Hindu renouncers (fakirs or sadhus) as early as the mid-1700s (2002:24).

He began questioning everything—the Vietnam War, the space program, social injustices (racism, poverty, sexism), environmental degradation. Seeking answers to grand existential questions, he began reading books on Hinduism and Buddhism:

And it made sense. It seemed like an application of my views on reality that were changing because of my drug-related experiences. And it was *religion!* It was a *way of life* that actually let you start living those principles about loving your brother and taking care of the planet. And I didn't get that in Christianity. I was born in that. I didn't get it.

For someone who had rejected “religion” as he knew it, LSD created a new worldview requiring a new ontological paradigm, one that Eastern religion seemed to offer. Like Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, and Michael Hollingshead a few years earlier, for him LSD seemed to briefly lift the veil of illusory material reality to catch glimpses of the white light of divine being beyond. This vision of Eastern wisdom inspired many to begin their own Journey to the East.

Once in South Asia many who had found religious meaning through substances like LSD began asking Hindu and Buddhist specialists their opinions about drug use and the spiritual quest. Answers ranged from skepticism to outright rejection. One of the earliest and best documented conversations was between the young fourteenth Dalai Lama and Allen Ginsberg in Dharamsala in 1962. Ginsberg—who had come to India heavily into drug use and convinced that hallucinogens offered a shortcut to spiritual enlightenment—peppered the Dalai Lama with questions on the relationship between drug-induced experience and meditative states. To Ginsberg's disappointment the Buddhist leader acknowledged that “a few glimpses into the unconscious mind . . . may be of use in loosening you up” but that ultimately drug use wasn't useful because any headway one might make wasn't due to “your own will and effort” and was therefore counterproductive (Snyder 1983:83). When Ginsberg persisted, describing the vision-enhancing qualities of LSD, the Dalai Lama asked mischievously, “If you take LSD, can you see what's in that briefcase?” (Baker 2008:126). Six years later when Richard Alpert asked the Dalai Lama the same questions, he got the same answers (Stablein 1985:52–53).

Among South Asian Hindus, attitudes toward mind-altering substances ranged from open cannabis use among certain renunciant sects, to passive tolerance by some mainstream pop gurus, to active condemnation. For example, late in his life the pioneering guru-to-the-stars Meher Baba published a pamphlet titled *God in a Pill?* (1966) in which

he rejected hallucinogens as “harmful physically, mentally, and spiritually,” warning that “the continued use of LSD leads to madness or death.”⁵ With the jury out on the dharma-dope connection, it was up to individual seekers to choose their own path. As a rule, the most serious dharma students moved beyond hard drug use while others used the presumed spiritual benefits of mind alteration as an excuse for more or less recreational tripping.

If “Hinduism” had become the default setting for most dharma tourists arriving in Kathmandu in the 1960s and early 1970s, as time progressed their religious associations underwent a subtle transformation, shifting progressively from Hinduism to Buddhism. Of course many foreigners were interested in Buddhism before the 1970s and many continued to be drawn to Hinduism after the 1970s, but during that decade a range of factors coalesced to make Buddhism ascendant in Western estimations while Hinduism’s luster tarnished under the harsh light of publicity. Rajneesh and the Maharishi fascinated Western seekers in the early 1970s, but by the end of the decade the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism had firmly captured the Western imagination.

Part of the waning of Western interest in Hinduism had to do with frustrations experienced in trying to *become* Hindu. For those accustomed to more evangelical religions like Christianity and Islam, becoming Hindu should have been a matter of confession. But for most Hindus, being Hindu is something one is born into. Hinduism is bound up in a hierarchical caste-based social system, and foreigners are (from the perspective of ritual purity) the lowest of untouchables: access to the world of Hindu religious practice is from the bottom only. Joining the anti-structural, ostensibly caste-rejecting orders of sadhu social renouncers seemed one way around this. But when it came to acceptance within specific Hindu groups, Western “sadhus” soon ran into the brick wall of popular opinion that held that no one could *become* Hindu (Tomory 1996:175).⁶

Describing his efforts to join a Naga sadhu order in India, one seeker remembered always feeling “discomfiture . . . arising from the fact that as a foreigner I was an unclean person, a *mleccha*:⁷ to orthodox Nagas, an outcast” (in Tomory 1996:217). If joining a group that officially disregarded caste was uncomfortable, joining the Hindu mainstream was virtually impossible. Like many other young Western “sadhus,” this man came

5. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meher_Baba.

6. A few stalwart Western sadhus have succeeded in carving out permanent places for themselves within Hindu orders: see Radhanath Swami’s biographical account of his transformation from 1960s hippie seeker to established “American Swami” (Radhanath 2010).

7. A Sanskrit term usually translated as “alien” or “barbarian.”

to Kathmandu a Hindu and left a Buddhist (cf. Tomory 1996:187). After meeting foreign Buddhists in the city, he writes:

I was beginning to think that they could feel more at home in a casteless religion like that one, where even lay people could integrate themselves into the way of life of the religion's native followers. The rigid class structure of Hinduism leaves no niche for foreigners apart from that of the classless sadhu—and my own experience had shown me just how small that niche really is. . . . On my twenty-fifth birthday I . . . cut off all my long, matted sadhu hair. (Tomory 1996:101)

Many Westerners I met echoed the observations of one American who had spent most of the 1970s in India and Nepal. “I think that as people get to know Hinduism, it’s less appealing.” For Western youth oriented around progressive political causes (civil rights, antipoverty, feminism, social justice), reconciling Hindu practices with their social values became increasingly difficult. An Italian ex-sadhu recalled, “I became very unhappy about [how women were treated], and about caste, and extremely unhappy about the dowry system. . . . Nobody wanted daughters.” Though he didn’t write off Hinduism completely, he concluded that “India had the lousiest social system in the world” (in Tomory 1996:177–78). As the 1970s wore on even some of the most popular Indian gurus—who had attracted huge international followings—began losing their appeal as they were caught up in high-profile media scandals involving sex, drugs, and other excesses. Recalling the whole Hindu guru-yogi scene, one person concluded, “There were just too many fakes.”

By contrast Buddhism—especially the Tibetan Buddhism Westerners encountered in Kathmandu—seemed more ethically and politically appealing. Ethically, Buddhism has powerful epistemological resonances with the Christian traditions most Westerners equated with “religion”; for example, its fundamental emphasis on compassion and nonviolence and its relatively egalitarian social ethos align closely with the moral teachings of the Biblical Jesus—even if institutional Christianity has traditionally distanced itself from those teachings. Further, Buddhism appeals to a kind of Protestant sensibility in which one *works* to achieve liberation/salvation whereas Hinduism (even if it has a similar karma-based epistemology/soteriology) appears more rule-bound and tied to a caste-based sociology that few Westerners could ideologically embrace. If Hinduism seemed to offer enlightenment only to the highborn, Buddhism held out the hope of salvation in *this* lifetime. Finally, many foreigners were disturbed by the live-animal sacrifices they observed in conjunction with Hindu worship, especially in Nepal. During festivals like Dasain and at certain temples

(like Dakshinkali in the Kathmandu Valley) animal sacrifice to the Hindu gods reaches a scale few Westerners can handle. Though all these animals are destined for the cooking pot, and the carnage is mild compared to a Western slaughterhouse, still blood sacrifice made Hinduism seem barbaric while Buddhism's emphasis on nonviolence appealed to liberal Western sensibilities. All in all, many Westerners found Buddhism's spiritual and social ethos easier to embrace than that of Hinduism.

As the plight of the Tibetans became more well-known in the West, Tibetan Buddhism also took on a unique political significance. The 1959 Chinese invasion of Tibet, the flood of Tibetan refugees (including the Dalai Lama) to India and Nepal, and tales of cultural destruction in Tibet at the hands of Red Guard zealots—all in the context of Cold War animosities—combined to turn Tibetans into the “baby seals” of Western human rights concerns (Dodin and Rather 2001:410). While Tibetan Buddhism had long appealed to fringe counterculturists in the West, it took Chinese persecution to turn it into a global cause célèbre. Tibetan Buddhism acquired a political correctness that distinguished it from Hinduism and attracted millions of admirers including Hollywood stars and even, finally, members of the Western academic Buddhist studies community. Thanks to scholars (both in and outside of the academy) the quantity and (especially) quality of literature available on Tibetan Buddhism grew exponentially during the 1970s, making Tibetan Buddhism more meaningful and more accessible to inquiring foreigners. As the Western counterculture cooled during the 1970s Tibetan Buddhism proved to be “Eastern wisdom” that one could bring home to meet the parents.

Tibetan Buddhism's appeal to the West also has to do with Tibetans

Watching dozens of goats being sacrificed at Dakshinkali, Jeff Greenwald describes how: “Every pore opened and I found myself drenched in sweat. My vision began to blur, too, and, realizing to my horror that I was going to faint, I plunged my head down between my knees and tried to breathe deeply and evenly. It worked, thank God—fainting at Dakshinkali would have been a pretty humiliating experience, even though I'm certain it's happened before. But the fact remains that I was affected in a profoundly physical way, and even now the memory of what I saw there fills me with loathing. . . . It makes me think neither more nor less of the Nepalese, but it sure opens my eyes as to where I really am. This is *not* Middle Earth” (1995 [1986]: 27).

themselves who—finding themselves stateless and in exile—faced the horrifying prospect of losing their cultural heritage as well. One answer to their dilemma was to leverage international sympathy into aid for their political struggle. Though controversial, from early on some Tibetan Buddhist leaders saw religion as a means of not only keeping Tibetan culture alive among Tibetans, but of spreading awareness of Tibetan concerns and bringing non-Tibetans into the fold, and into the fight. The story of Kathmandu’s Kopan Monastery is a brilliant illustration of how Westerners attracted to Tibetan Buddhism found Tibetan Buddhists in search of foreigners. From this initial encounter one can trace the origins of the current massive following that Tibetan Buddhism enjoys around the world.

Princess Zina and the Founding of Kopan Monastery

The Bodhanath Stupa a few kilometers east of Kathmandu is surrounded by dozens of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries including large establishments with magnificent Tibetan-style buildings funded by wealthy local Tibetan business people and Buddhists from abroad seeking to accrue good karma through charitable gifts. Many of these monasteries are recreations of ancient institutions in Tibet, transplanted to the Kathmandu Valley by their exiled leaders following the Chinese invasion (Raj 1999). One of the area’s oldest is Kopan Monastery, founded in 1969 and located on a ridge extending down from the northern valley rim. Ironically, though founded in conjunction with Tibetan Lamas, Kopan Monastery is not a continuation of some existing order or tradition but represents, arguably, the birth of a new Tibetan Buddhist outreach to the world. From Kopan the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) was founded in 1975 and today Kopan serves as the “mother monastery” for a network of over 150 FPMT centers, projects, and services in thirty-seven countries around the world (and for FPMT’s Wisdom Publications, the influential Buddhist publishing house based in Boston). Although several of the other monasteries around Bodhanath now cater to Western students, from the beginning Kopan was the only monastery that “emphatically exists as the hub of an *international* organization that aims primarily to bring Buddhism to the West” (Moran 2004:74). Tellingly, the monastery’s origins lie in the bizarre convergence of an eccentric Western seeker and a group of refugee Tibetan monks desperate to keep Buddhism alive in exile. How the lives of “Princess” Zina Rachevsky and Lamas Yeshe and Zopa intersected is a strange but perhaps inevitable story, as it was only a matter of time before Westerners steeped in mystical accounts of Tibetan

spirituality would find Tibetan Buddhist exiles intent on keeping their traditions (and political identity) alive by introducing them to non-Tibetans.

Zina Rachevsky was born in Paris in 1930, the daughter of a fabulously wealthy American heiress from New York and a Russian émigré. Though her (common-born) Russian father's sister had married an exiled Russian duke, Zina had no royal blood. Nevertheless, from early on Rachevsky billed herself a Russian princess in the high-society circles in which she moved, and later as a way of branding herself while trying to break into Hollywood show business. Though she almost certainly knew it was a myth, even later in life—long after she had abandoned her socialite ways and acting ambitions—Rachevsky did little to disabuse people of their belief in her royalty. To the end she was known as Princess Zina even by close friends and associates.⁸

The granddaughter of billionaire Simon William Straus, Rachevsky grew up privileged in New York City and Paris. Rachevsky family lore portrays Zina as a “wild child” who rebelled against domestic propriety and—scandalously—aspired to a Hollywood career.⁹ From the early to mid-1950s Rachevsky moved back and forth between Europe and Hollywood though she seems to have made more appearances in gossip columns than on screen. In 1952 the Paris press reported that “Marlon Brando’s constant flame around Paris these days is blonde, volatile Zina Rachevsky, who called herself Princess d’Harcourt in Hollywood last year. She has a bit part as one of the beauties from Maxim’s in *The Merry Widow*.” In 1953 syndicated columnist Walter Winchell wrote that “Buxom Zina Rachevsky, international glamour gal deluxe (who traces her ancestry to the Czars, but don’t they all?) has finally found her forte in Italian films where what passes for *avoirdu pois* [fleshiness] here makes a babe into a busty, lusty siren.”¹⁰ She also landed minor roles in early television dramas.¹¹

By 1956 Rachevsky, perhaps disillusioned with her dreams of stardom, started down a very different path, one leading her into the Beat-era counterculture and eventually a new spiritual quest. In May 1956 she moved from Paris back to New York City where she lived in Greenwich Village and began to associate closely with the bohemian beatnik scene, becoming friends with Beat poets like Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso.¹²

8. See <http://seesaw.typepad.com/blog/2008/03/zina-rachevsky-jewish-princess-and-the-Tibet-connection.html> (accessed 9/1/10).

9. See <http://seesaw.typepad.com/blog/2008/03/zina-rachevsky-jewish-princess-and-the-Tibet-connection.html> (accessed 9/1/10).

10. See www.glamourgirlsofthesilverscreen.com.

11. See <http://ctva.biz/US/Anthology/ConradNagelTheater.htm>.

12. In addition to her friendship, Rachevsky seems to have periodically given Corso funds to prop up his profligate, high-maintenance lifestyle (see Corso 2003:179–80).



19 Zina Rachevsky glamor photo, ca. 1953. Courtesy Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive.

Like them, Rachevsky dabbled in marijuana and other recreational drugs, for which she was busted in 1957.¹³ Also like many in the Beat circle, around this time Rachevsky began pursuing “Eastern wisdom.” Attracted initially to Theosophy, by the late 1950s she had (by some accounts) come to be-

13. See www.glamourgirlsofthesilverscreen.com. See also Corso 2003:170.

lieve she was the reincarnation of Madam Blavatsky, the Theosophical Society's founder.¹⁴ By the early 1960s Rachevsky was married to Beat-era filmmaker Conrad Rooks and divided her time between Europe and New York. In 1962 a friend visiting Zina in Athens described her as "a living example of a 'White Goddess'"—though now more of the spiritual than the Hollywood variety. This friend

found Zina to be the embodiment of a woman with the gifts of beauty, generosity of spirit, and inclination whose task was to inspire men. . . . She was the only woman I have ever known who in conversation looked directly at me with her wonderful, large blue eyes [to ask penetrating questions] that awakened a new sense within me of who I was and what I could do.¹⁵

Clearly Zina was already asking herself these tough questions and was exploring her own newly awakening consciousness.

In Athens Zina also gave her friend a copy of *Siddhartha*, Hermann Hesse's retelling of the life of the Buddha.¹⁶ It's fascinating to think of Rachevsky, the highborn "Princess" coming to identify with the princely young Gautama Buddha who renounced his life of privilege and indulgence for one of simplicity, spiritual questing, and, ultimately, enlightenment.¹⁷ During these years friends described Zina as practicing yoga and generally gravitating toward Eastern spirituality (Corso 2003:314, 387). Teetering on the edge of a decision to begin a serious spiritual journey, the final straw seems to have been the 1966 publication of Lama Govinda's autobiographical *The Way of the White Clouds* which recounts the German-born monk's life as a student of Buddhism and his claims to have been initiated into various Tibetan Buddhist sects in a monastery in northern India. Zina read the book and by early 1967 had set out for South Asia where she was to spend the rest of her life.

After traveling through Sri Lanka and India, by April 1967 Rachevsky was in Darjeeling (in the Himalayas of northern India) trying to find the Tibetan teacher made famous by Lama Govinda. In his book Lama Govinda describes studying under Lama Domo Geshe Rinpoche in a monastery in northern Sikkim. But with Sikkim closed to foreigners, Rachevsky made her way to nearby Darjeeling where she went in search of Tibetans asking

14. See www.glamourgirsofthesilverscreen.com.

15. <http://seesaw.typepad.com/blog/2009/04/-zina-rachevskys-friend-writes-about-her.html>.

16. <http://seesaw.typepad.com/blog/2009/04/-zina-rachevskys-friend-writes-about-her.html>.

17. In the early 1970s Rachevsky's (by then former) husband Conrad Rooks made a film version of *Siddhartha*, shot in India with Indian actors, and released in 1972 (Beisler 2006:10; http://oldschoolreviews.com/rev_70/siddhartha.htm).

anyone who would listen if they knew how she could meet Domo Geshe Rinpoche. One day, while visiting the Ghoom Monastery in Darjeeling (a branch of Domo Geshe Rinpoche's original monastery in southern Tibet), Rachevsky was surprised to find her question answered affirmatively with an offer to meet the Rinpoche. But rather than Lama Govinda's teacher, Zina was introduced (unbeknownst to her) to a young monk from the Solu Khumbu region of Nepal named Lama Zopa. Lama Zopa had been trained at Domo Geshe Rinpoche's monastery in Tibet but had fled to India where he was assigned to the wretched Buxa Duar Tibetan refugee camp in Bengal, near the Darjeeling border. Because of his association with the Domo monastery, Lama Zopa was also known as Domo Rinpoche, leading some to believe he was the person Rachevsky was seeking. Unaware of the mistaken identity she strode forward and boldly asked: "How can I receive peace and liberation?" (Mackenzie 1992:41).

Lama Zopa was flabbergasted at having been sought out by a strange and aggressive—but seemingly sincere—Western woman. At a loss, he quickly called on *his* teacher, Lama Thubten Yeshe, for advice and help in translating. Lama Yeshe (1935–1984) had spent most of his life as a monk in the great Sera Monastery outside of Lhasa before fleeing the Chinese invasion in 1959. In various refugee camps in India he continued his studies, including English which he attempted to teach himself from books (Mackenzie 1992:34–39). It was at the Buxa Duar refugee camp that he met Lama Zopa. Faced with her profound question, Lama Yeshe recalled:

I gave her some sort of answer, with my limited English, and after an hour she said she had to leave. To my surprise she asked if she could return the next day. I said, "all right." And she did come and asked more questions, and I gave teachings. For one week she made the journey by jeep to see us, and then she asked if we'd be prepared to go visit her. (Mackenzie 1992:42)

It's here that versions of the story diverge. According to Lama Yeshe, he was very hesitant to take on such a rank novice foreign woman as a student—with all of the cultural and linguistic barriers the relationship implied—but Lama Zopa "begged . . . over and over again not to forsake this woman who had come seeking his help" (Mackenzie 1992:42). But other sources suggest that while Zina may have been earnestly looking for a teacher, Lamas Zopa and Yeshe were equally eager to find wealthy foreigners to teach.¹⁸ When fate (or karma) brought a rich (even "royal")

18. See <http://seesaw.typepad.com/blog/2008/03/zina-rachevsky-jewish-princess-and-the-Tibet-connection.html> (accessed 9/1/10).



20 Zina Rachevsky with Lama Yeshe (left) and Lama Zopa (right). Courtesy Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive.

and well-connected American to their door, and when she offered to take them out of their squalid refugee camp (a former British prison that Lama Yeshe (2009) referred to as a “concentration camp”) to live with her in a comfortable villa in Darjeeling Town, it’s not hard to imagine that the Lamas might have been persuaded by more than just the moral obligation to teach the dharma. It seems most likely that in their conversations a vision began to emerge for an unprecedented outreach to foreign seekers then beginning to flood the Indian subcontinent. It was a risky step that took courage but Lamas Zopa and Yeshe had little to lose, and much to gain, by linking their lives with Zina Rachevsky’s.

For nine months the Lamas lived in a cottage on the grounds of Zina's rented Villa Altomont in Darjeeling Town where they gave daily private teachings. Every morning Zina met them but her attachments to her old way of life remained strong. Zina was the first Westerner Lama Zopa had ever met, and he found her a thing of wonder:

She'd get up early looking like a sixty-year-old woman, spend a couple of hours in the bathroom, and come out looking like a sixteen-year-old girl! Although she came for teachings she'd spend much of the time telling us stories of her adventures in various parts of the world. (Zopa 2009)

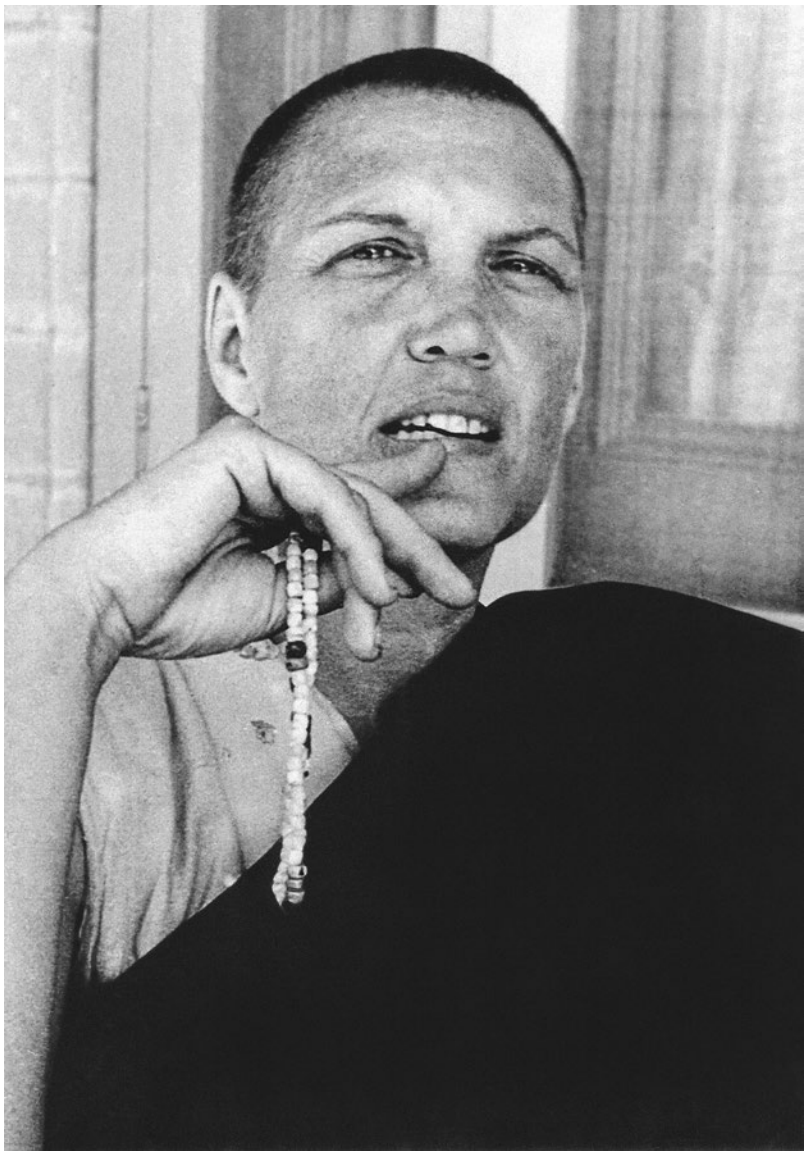
After nine months, Zina decided to take the vows of a Buddhist nun but an expired visa eventually got her into trouble with the Indian police. Unaccustomed to being on the receiving end of orders, Zina's princessly ways asserted themselves. Lama Yeshe recalled:

She was a very strong character, an unusually strong woman, and told the police that they were pigs and should stay away from her place. This rather annoyed them and they tried to hassle her but there wasn't much they could do until they decided to label her a Russian spy. Then they put a lot of pressure on her and kicked her out of Darjeeling. (Yeshe 2009)

By July 1968 Rachevsky was back in India, this time in Dharamsala, the Dalai Lama's home and the seat of the Tibetan Government in exile. With the Dalai Lama's blessing, on July 31 she received the nun's novice vows and became Anila Thubten Chang Chub Palmo. At this point, according to Lama Yeshe, the trio considered moving to the West but ultimately decided on Nepal (Mackenzie 1992:43).

Exactly when they arrived in Kathmandu isn't clear, but probably not long after Rachevsky's ordination in 1968. They moved to the Bodhanath area outside of Kathmandu where Zina rented a house amid the already established enclave of resident foreigners, including many interested in Buddhism. The Lamas resided with the Chini Lama, the traditional caretaker of the Bodha Stupa (Zopa 2009). Before long, Zina and the Lamas had attracted a group of old and new friends, curious to learn about Zina's transformation; teachings ensued, crowds grew, and soon the three took the next big step—looking for real estate.

The hilltop site that became the location of Kopan Monastery was well known to Kathmandu expats well before Zina arrived, which probably explains how she learned of it. Originally the weekend home of the king's official raj guru or royal preceptor (Raj 1999:23), by the 1960s the site was



21 Zina Rachevsky after her ordination, 1968. Courtesy Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive.

being rented to resident foreigners. Exactly how and in whose name the transaction occurred is unclear, but it was Zina's money that purchased the Kopan hill property in 1969, which a visitor to the monastery in the fall of 1969 described as a "square stone single-story building set in a garden." There he "found Zena [*sic*] in a beautiful room tastefully decorated with a thick wall-to-wall white carpet, elegant armchairs and sofas, and walled with books. Incense hung on the air" (in Tomory 1996:99).

If the Lamas brought Rachevsky to Nepal to distance her from the distractions of the West, her instinct to be at the center of the social swirl was not easily subdued. Dressed in burgundy robes and officially ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist nun, Rachevsky was immediately an object of interest and admiration for thousands of Western youth flooding into Nepal, intent on finding someone—*anyone*—who was really "in the Know." Early visitors describe Zina as zealously—even jealously—guarding her Tibetan teachers and trying to make herself the lamas' official gatekeeper (Willis 2001:152). When Michael Hollingshead visited Rachevsky in late 1969 he found "the Abbess . . . sitting on the lawn in a circle of beautiful girls with the occasional male *sadhu* seated quietly within their midst" (1973:251). Another described her as

a large, assertive woman, speaking with a strange fervor of the superiority of Mahayana Buddhism—the Greater Vehicle in which all may ride—to all other paths of liberation. Her cropped hair and round, ruddy face made her look a little masculine. Sometimes she looked like Helena Blavatsky, or even Gertrude Stein. (in Tomory 1996:99)

At forty years old and with an impeccable countercultural pedigree, by 1970 Zina was one of the senior members—and focal points—of Kathmandu's emerging hippie community. Visitors returned repeatedly to the Kopan hill to converse with the Lamas "about The Way, and with Zina, about The Scene" (Tomory 1996:100).

With growing crowds at Kopan, Zina asked if the Lamas could lead scheduled teachings that could be announced in advance and delivered efficiently to large groups. Lama Yeshe resisted but in March 1971 Lama Zopa taught the first formal course at Kopan—a kind of introduction to Buddhism based on a classic Tibetan text (Zopa 2009). For five days Lama Zopa guided his listeners through a discussion of the spiritual stages an aspirant would move through on the way to achieving liberation (MacKenzie 1992:11). His lectures received very positive feedback from the small handful of Westerners in attendance (including Zina) and became the basis for what soon became Kopan's famous annual thirty-day November course.

With Kopan's teaching mission becoming clear, by the early 1970s Rachevsky must have felt a certain ambiguity about her own role at the monastery. Sources suggest that Zina's presence soon became somewhat controversial. With characteristically mixed emotions, one early Kopan resident remembered:

From time to time her autocratic manner would surface. . . . She wanted us to think of her as a mother, but really we could only think of her still as a princess! She had a fierce temper . . . and she was hopeless with money. She couldn't handle it at all—like a lot of rich, spoilt people. She was also full of enthusiasm and loved the lamas so much. She had a very big heart. (in Mackenzie 1992:44)

Jan Willis, another early student of Lama Yeshe, describes Zina as a gracious hostess but also overprotective and domineering. "It was clear that she enjoyed her status as the 'mommy' of this fledgling monastery" (2001:153). Likely Zina herself sensed her continued presence at Kopan was not just less essential but perhaps even counterproductive even though her experience in Lama Zopa's initial formal teaching seems to have been personally transformative. Lama Zopa (2009) recalled how Zina "was completely astonished at the teachings. I can't imitate the way she expressed herself but she was very happy, sort of completely amazed." Perhaps elevated to a new level of understanding and commitment, Rachevsky's decision (in late 1972) to begin a three-year silent meditation retreat suggests she had entered a dramatically new stage in life, with loosened ties to Kopan. Exiling herself to a remote monastery in the Everest region of Nepal, Rachevsky had taken a huge step in the direction of serious engagement with Buddhist teachings.

Tragically, Zina did not make it through her retreat. In July 1973, after a brief but violent illness, she died (at age forty-two) in a monastery in Solu Khumbu. She was cremated according to Buddhist practices, without formal investigation or autopsy. People with her at her death describe symptoms indicative of anything from dysentery to peritonitis.

Back in Kathmandu rumors circulated that Lamas Zopa and Yeshe had killed Zina to get hold of Kopan. No doubt these stories are false but they do point to a popular awareness of some kind of tension—even if only implicit—between the Lamas and Zina over Kopan's leadership. After Zina's death Kopan continued to flourish, quickly emerging as the nucleus of a global Tibetan Buddhist outreach to foreign seekers. But among Kopan insiders, Zina's legacy was decidedly mixed. Lamas Yeshe and Zopa always clearly acknowledged Rachevsky's pivotal role in their life's work. But Western Buddhist adherents—those most clearly

following in Zina's footsteps—were more likely to distance themselves and their cause from the eccentric beatnik-hippie-Hollywood “princess” whose biography, as time went on, appeared more embarrassing than inspirational.

When Liza Cowan visited Kopan Monastery in the early 1980s to learn firsthand about the last years of her colorful first cousin Zina, she was met with “walls of silence”:

If she had founded the center, surely someone would be willing to discuss her, tell me about her time there, her role in the founding. But to the contrary, people shunned me. People said, “someone else knew her but he's not here,” or “he's here but he's busy,” or “nobody here knew her.” It felt wrong. I had the distinct sense I was being lied to, or purposefully avoided.¹⁹

Cowan acknowledges she has no way of proving a conspiracy of silence but it was clear that, less than a decade after her death, Zina Rachevsky's legacy was quickly being erased from the Kopan Monastery's collective memory.

Kopon Monastery and Dharma Tourism

In the early 1970s Kopan Monastery quickly gained an international reputation as a center for Buddhist studies that was not just accessible to Westerners but explicitly welcomed them, going out of its way to adapt Buddhist teachings to Western minds and conditions. Along with the revered Tibetan lamas and religious scholars who served as its main instructors, Kopan became (and remains) the only monastery in Nepal where foreign-born nuns and monks routinely teach other foreign students of Buddhism (Moran 2004:72). Kopan emphasized meeting students where they were (linguistically, culturally, spiritually) and presenting Buddhism not as a Tibetan cultural practice but as a universal paradigm applicable to any cultural context.

Since Lama Zopa's first course in 1971, Kopan has been known for its regularly scheduled courses that culminate in the annual one-month fall course. These courses quickly became a powerful magnet attracting Western seekers, many of whom had already spent months or years on dharma quests in India.

19. See <http://seesaw.typepad.com/blog/2008/03/zina-rachevsky-jewish-princess-and-the-Tibet-connection.html> (accessed 9/1/10).

By the time they reached Kopan most of them had been through the whole spiritual supermarket trip, shopping at various ashrams around India, gleaning an eclectic range of mystical snippets and eastern philosophies, forever on the great guru hunt. (Mackenzie 1992:47)

One American seeker arrived at Kopan “almost naked with hair down to his buttocks and ash smeared all over his body.” He had spent the previous year hanging out by the cremation platforms in the holy city of Banaras hoping to move beyond attachment to the material world. Eventually disillusioned, he came to Kopan and instantly felt at home with Lamas Yeshe and Zopa who inspired not just veneration, but also—because instruction was in a language he could literally understand—real hope for serious spiritual progress (Mackenzie 1992:47–48).

As Kopan’s fame spread throughout the South Asian dharma circuit, Nepal’s (mistaken) reputation as a “Buddhist country” only grew as Western seekers flocked there, zealously hitching their spiritual aspirations to Buddhism. One American remembered how by 1972, among Western young people in Kathmandu:

It was already *very* anti-Hindu, very pro-Buddhist. You got flack for studying [Hinduism]. It was very uncool. It was only among the real pothead hippies, and maybe a few yoga types, that Hinduism was cool. All the early Kopan people were already there. They were setting the mood for what’s cool.

Kopan turned diffuse but potent longings into programed agendas for spiritual development and helped turn the tide of Western interest away from Hinduism and toward Buddhism, where it overwhelmingly remains to this day.

Lamas Yeshe and Zopa intentionally played to each other’s strengths in appealing to different kinds of Westerners. Lama Zopa was introverted and bookish with a quietly confident academic competency, authoritative without being authoritarian. People eagerly absorbed his formal learned discourses. Outspoken, flamboyant, and unconventional, Lama Yeshe had “boundless energy” that “infused every gesture, word, or look” (Mackenzie 1992:30). “Lama Yeshe would laugh at times when you weren’t sure what was so funny,” said one former student. “It made you think about things you took for granted.”

While Lama Zopa led the formal teachings, Lama Yeshe took the role of cultural interpreter, always looking for ways to reach his Western students. “Our teachings are not secret doctrines,” said Lama Yeshe,

but I had to think of how I could put my Buddhism in a western way. The Tibetan method is slow and full of historical references. Nagarjuna said this . . . Shantideva said that . . . westerners needed something more concrete, something they could relate to their own experience. I couldn't change the Buddha's teaching, but I had to find a way to get it across. (Mackenzie 1992:53)

Part of the challenge was understanding where students were coming from, literally and figuratively. Lama Yeshe took pains to understand their motivations and assumptions. When he traveled to the West (first in 1974) his visits became virtual research trips. He wore nonreligious clothing and visited beaches, nightclubs, strip joints, Disneyland, and Las Vegas. He would watch TV and pay special attention to commercials (Mackenzie 1992:26–28). “Lama [Yeshe] was like an anthropologist, turning the tables and studying us,” says Mackenzie (1992:27). Understanding the civilization that created such profound material attachments was key to freeing his students' minds from them.

Contending with students' attachments to all things Oriental was also important. For many, Tibetan Buddhism's appeal was precisely its Tibetan pedigree—an exotic otherness. The cultural packaging was exactly what some students longed to appropriate. To them Yeshe admonished, “Don't get hung up on all these oriental forms. A Buddha just means a Fully Awakened Being. That's all. He doesn't have to have yellow skin and slanting eyes. . . . The West will create western Buddhas”²⁰ (Mackenzie 1992:16).

The other Oriental(ist) attachment that had to be overcome was guru fixation. After following Hindu spiritual leaders who stressed darshan (gazing upon the face of the master) as a kind of devotional practice, or bhakti (intense emotional devotion) and unquestioned submission to authority,²¹ many students were looking not just for a spiritual master, but to be spiritually mastered. By contrast, the Kopan lamas established an ethos of education rather than indoctrination, redirecting student energies away from “blind faith” and encouraging them to approach Buddha dharma with skeptical, questioning minds. Even so, Tibetan Buddhism's traditional practices of prostrations before, and other kinds of ritual veneration of, spiritual elders often walk a fine line between reverence and submission.

20. Perhaps to prove the point, soon after his death in 1984, Lama Yeshe's reincarnation was identified (by Lama Zopa) as a Spanish boy, the child of European Buddhists and FPMT students (Mackenzie 1992).

21. The Hare Krishna movement sometimes took these tendencies of ecstatic devotion and blind obedience to almost pathological extremes (Daner 1976).

Although consistent with his goal of adapting Buddhism for Westerners, Lama Yeshe's attitude toward Christianity sometimes surprised and disappointed his students. One who attended a course in 1979 described how Lama Yeshe had asked the crowd of several hundred to raise their hands if they were from Christian backgrounds. About 80 percent responded affirmatively. He then asked how many wanted to become Buddhists. At this, virtually every hand went up. To their surprise, Lama Yeshe said, "I can help you become better Christians, but I can't make you a Buddhist." For Westerners tied to a conversion and faith-based model of religious adherence, this was a hard message to swallow. For them religious affiliation was about identity politics at least as much as the spiritual quest. Their attraction to Buddhism was part of a countercultural drive to critique Western civilization, often Christianity specifically. Few had traveled to the other side of the world to sit at the feet of Buddhist masters in order to become better Christians (or Jews, or Muslims, etc.).

Lama Yeshe stressed that Buddhism should fit into his student's cultural world if they were to successfully live it at home. He had a deep respect for Jesus Christ (Mackenzie 1992:29) and often drew parallels between Christ's teachings and Buddhist principles.²² In Jesus he saw a figure of great compassion, and told his students they were "lucky to have been born in a Christian society and to have that wisdom." He called Jesus a bodhisattva (an enlightened being) and compared him to Buddhist saints like Naropa and the Dalai Lama. "The quality of Buddha and the quality of God are the same thing according to Christianity and Buddhism." He even equated the godly nature of Shakyamuni Buddha with that of Jesus Christ. He wasn't implying that Buddhism had nothing to offer Christians, but suggested that the teachings of the Biblical Jesus offered Westerners a culturally accessible basis from which to cultivate a Buddha nature.

For Lama Yeshe the Buddhist principle of *bodhicitta* was the "essence of all religion" (Mackenzie 1992:62). *Bodhicitta*, the "awakening mind," refers to a consciousness striving toward enlightenment, but in practice *bodhicitta* implies compassion—selfless loving compassion for all other beings as the aim and pathway toward enlightenment. Having encountered Christians, especially monks and nuns, on his travels, he observed, "We Buddhists *talk* a lot about Bodhicitta, a lot of blah, blah, blah, but the Christians go out and do it." As a telling aside he added, "You say Christians have no meditations, but that's wrong conception. I tell you, that's

22. The quotations following in this paragraph come from a pair of YouTube videos titled "Lama Yeshe Christmas 1982" parts 1 and 2 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYxSrkyK68>). This is a version of a teaching that he gave numerous times and also published in book form in 1978 under the title *Silent Mind, Holy Mind*.

wrong” (Mackenzie 1992:30). For Lama Yeshe, these acts of going out and doing compassion were a form of “meditation,” no matter what his students might think.

Meditation, the Self, and the Western Encounter with Tibetan Buddhism

Lama Yeshe’s insistence that *bodhicitta* was a meditative practice (for Buddhists and Christians) points to an important debate that surfaced early on at Kopan and remains a defining characteristic of the West’s encounter with Tibetan Buddhism. Beneath this debate lies a fundamental epistemological divide that separated Lama Yeshe from his Western students. At issue are differing views about what constitutes “meditation,” but also soteriology (the nature of salvation), the goal of the religious life, and the role and meaning of “the self” in religious experience. In spite of his remarkable effort to understand his students’ cultural baggage, Lama Yeshe perhaps never grasped how profoundly embedded they were in a Western folk epistemology. Conversely, it is profoundly difficult for Westerners to grasp Buddhist concepts—such as karma, the illusion of self, reincarnation—that contradict Western assumptions about reality.

One way to unpack this complex encounter is to return to Lama Yeshe’s emphasis on *bodhicitta*. After calling it “the essence of all religion,” he continued,

Bodhicitta is the most worthwhile thing. For western people it is the best way, the easiest way. Sitting cross-legged meditating is not western-style. Loving kindness is western style, because of your Christian orientation. Western people have that energy. So bodhicitta is very simple, very logical for you western people. (Mackenzie 1992:62–63)

Two questions come to the fore: What is the most worthwhile thing, and what constitutes “meditation”? For Lama Yeshe, the answer to both is *bodhicitta*. Living a life of profoundly selfless and loving compassion toward other beings was not only the ultimate life goal for a Buddhist, but also a form of “meditation.” For Tibetan Buddhists “sitting cross-legged” is a form of devotional practice (involving ritual visualizations aimed at bringing about heightened mental states). But these exercises are only one among many practices—reciting mantras and religious texts, making offerings, ritual prostrations, and circumambulations—all intended

to refine insight and accumulate spiritual merit (or “good karma”). And if increasing perception and merit are the goals of devotional practice, by far the most effective means of doing so is *bodhicitta*. Lama Yeshe admonishes his students to get up off their cross-legged backsides, embrace *bodhicitta* (even in its Christian form), and compassionately serve others, thereby accruing the merit and wisdom that leads to a higher rebirth. Thus Lama Yeshe identified *bodhicitta*, “loving kindness,” as the best, simplest, and most logical spiritual path “for you western people.”

It wasn’t coincidental that Lama Yeshe singled out “sitting cross-legged meditating” for critical comment because this was exactly what his Western students were most intent on doing. Indeed, Peter Moran, whose ethnography of Western Buddhists in Bodhanath in the 1990s offers valuable insights into earlier decades as well, found that most Westerners essentially *equated* Buddhism and meditation. “For nearly every Western Buddhist that I met,” writes Moran, “meditation . . . is the centerpiece of a self-consciously spiritual practice” (2004:164).

Ironically, Western Buddhists have elevated “meditation” to a place it never had among Tibetan Buddhists. Although the practice exists within Tibetan Buddhism, it is associated with advanced states of consciousness achieved (through many rebirths) by “religious virtuosi”—typically by reincarnate lamas (*tulkus*) or extreme renunciants (Lewis 2014). Westerners in Nepal assume that Tibetan monks meditate most of the time and are disappointed to find that many do so rarely, if ever (Moran 2004:99, 163). Tibetan Buddhists emulate less those who spend months and years sitting in a cave, than those who live lives of nonattachment and compassion. Westerners understand the essence of Buddhism as an individual and inner quest toward self-discovery and self-improvement, a reduction that Lama Yeshe challenged.

Here it is important to retrace some complex historical and cultural pathways that led Westerners on this “self”-directed quest, ultimately, to places like Nepal. Crucial to this story is the West’s “psychologization” of both “the self” and of Buddhism (see chapter 1). The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a fundamental transformation in Western epistemological understandings of human nature. Part of this shift was the decline of moral discourses centered on a notion of “the soul,” and the rise of new understandings of the nature of being oriented around the idea of “the self.” Whether we see Freud as a cause or consequence of this shift, it is in Freudian psychology that the transformation of the soul into the self was most famously (and influentially) articulated. In Freudian epistemology the self becomes a thing (in three parts: id, ego, superego) that can be analyzed, therapeutically manipulated, medical-

ized, improved (self-improvement), denied (self-denial), and controlled (self-control). Whereas the soul was the domain of religion (under God's control), the self was the reserve of science and, eventually, the self itself. That is, the self became a personal project: a *thing* to be developed, scrutinized, treated, and "realized."

In his famous essay "'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture," Warren Susman (1984) brilliantly charts the shifting discourse in the US away from the nineteenth-century focus on "character" conceived as the moral reflection of one's spiritual state, or soul. From this "culture of character," Susman tracks the rise of a new "culture of personality" focused on *self*-development. With this shift came a flood of new "self-help" manuals and self-therapies designed to help individuals accomplish these new projects of "self-realization." Aided by a raft of commodified products and services (not least psychotherapy), "the self" became an all-absorbing project of discovery and improvement—and one of the foundational building blocks of Western understandings and experiences of reality.

Anthony Giddens (1991), drawing on these insights, argues that (in the West) "self-identity" became a primary cultural preoccupation of the twentieth century. For Giddens the Western epistemological fixation on self created an intense reflexivity—a perpetual self-awareness, preoccupation with interiority, and gaze within—such that life itself has come to be experienced as a narrative quest. Personal meaning is bound up in self-consciously organized episodes and desires to such a degree that we come to experience and explain the self through carefully managed "biographical narratives" (1991:52–55). Because self-narratives extend not only into the past (as a way of explaining the present) but into the future (desired outcomes), an extraordinary burden falls upon "the self" to take responsibility for "personal" failures and to individually secure a successful future. To a degree unknown previously, or in other cultural contexts, this modern Western notion of self places the onus of responsibility on the individual, imagined as an autonomous, independent agent. The self becomes profoundly answerable to the self

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—ADVERTISEMENT FOR A TOUR COMPANY SPECIALIZING IN TRAVEL FOR WESTERN BUDDHISTS. *TRICYCLE: THE BUDDHIST REVIEW* (WINTER 1997): 106 (CITED IN MORAN 2004: 44).

for “its” own success, happiness, improvement, and—if you’re also a Buddhist—liberation.

Closely related to this psychologization of the self was the early twentieth-century psychologization of Eastern religion generally, and Buddhism in particular (Pederson 2001; Gomez 1995). Carl Jung’s insistence that an ancient Tibetan Buddhist text was “in the highest degree psychological in its outlook” and offered “deep insight into the secrets of the human psyche” (1958 [1935]:284–85) is just part of a larger countercultural trend that imagined the East to be a cure for Western ills.²³ Thirty years later Harvard psychologists Leary, Metzner, and Alpert (1964) treated the same Tibetan text as a kind of psychological allegory with psychotherapeutic implications. Since then the notion of “the East as (psycho)therapy” has flourished in Western countercultural (most notably New Age) circles as everything from yoga to feng-shui has been transformed into techniques for “self-therapy.” Once Eastern religion is reimaged as “psychology,” then Oriental religious practices—especially “meditation”—can be recast as “techniques for the attainment of mental health or, in other words, psychotherapy” (Pedersen 2001:160; c.f. Moran 2004:164). Historian of Buddhism in America Thomas Tweed found that whereas Victorians had been attracted to Buddhism for its “more intellectually satisfying worldview,” by the late twentieth century “the single most significant motive for joining Buddhist groups was the desire to find relief from physical and psychological suffering through practices such as chanting and meditation” (1992:159). For many the Buddhist sangha, or community of believers, had become a self-help group.²⁴

It is this profoundly heavy cultural baggage—of imagined autonomous individuality, self-reflexive interiority, and a notion of “the East-as-cure”—that Westerners brought (and bring) to their encounter with Buddhism. What’s more, it is this same mountain of baggage that stands between Westerners and some of the most basic Buddhist understandings of reality. Most obvious is the epistemological status of “the self” in Buddhist Madhyamaka philosophy which insists on the illusory nature of material exist-

23. Though, initially not all Jungians were eager to embrace meditation. M. Esther Harding, a student and close associate of Jung, warned that Westerners pursuing meditation and other “spiritual exercises peculiar to the Orient . . . would become clinically insane.” She held that meditation was a symbolic form “peculiar [to the] content of the Eastern psyche” and dangerous to Westerners (Samraj 2004:165–66).

24. Other forms of meditation practices take this despiritualization even further, rebranding meditation as an aid to “relaxation” and even “fitness.” Today the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s Transcendental Meditation (TM) is “a trademarked form of relaxation that involves sitting quietly saying a mantra to yourself for 20 minutes twice a day” (Hoffman 2013:26). Rather than going to the church or temple, now practitioners “compared the practice to going to the gym.” Said one person, “TM is more like working out” (ibid.:32).

tence via a theory of (inter)dependent causation.²⁵ By this way of thinking “the self,” the autonomous individual, and the mental sensation of I/me/mine are all illusory outcomes of dependent causation. According to Buddhist philosophy, imagining the self as narrative, autobiographical, or “project”-oriented (to use Giddens’s terms) is to succumb to the seduction of an illusory coherence where in fact there is no permanence, no unity, and no reality. In Buddhist epistemology there is no “self,” only a kind of emanation of a universal consciousness that exists in varying degrees of enlightenment as to its very nature. Yet arguably Buddhism’s appeal for many Westerners is precisely the kind of self-work (self-help, self-therapy) that “meditation” (imagined as an exercise in self-control and self-transformation) can produce in the form of self-awareness, self-realization, and “mental health.” In this light “meditation” appears much less an ancient spiritual practice and much more an artifact of late modernity as the modern “self” seeks solace and healing in a tradition that fundamentally denies its very existence.

Another factor that leads many foreigners to Buddhism and to heroic, almost penitential, practices like “cross-legged meditation” may be deeply ingrained Western soteriological assumptions. For people raised in the Judeo-Christian (and especially Protestant) tradition, with its understanding of divine judgment and *personal* responsibility for salvation, there is a very powerful emotional drive to secure the self—in *this lifetime*. Conversely, for most Tibetans—and others deeply socialized in an epistemology of merit, karma, and reincarnation—there is no primal fear of “eternal damnation” but rather a desire to steadily work toward better rebirths (Lewis 2014). Steeped in their “one-chance” soteriological worldview, Westerners want nirvana (salvation), and they want it *now*. Tibetans understand liberation to be the result of countless lifetimes of accumulated merit and gradually refined consciousness. Thus we arrive, full circle, back at Lama Yeshe’s admonitions to his Western followers to shift their priorities from “sitting cross-legged meditating” to living socially engaged lives of *bodhicitta*. The Dalai Lama frequently says much the same thing:

Nirvana may be the final object of attainment, but at the moment it is difficult to reach. Thus the practical and realistic aim is compassion, a warm heart, serving other

25. In a nutshell, this theory holds that all phenomena and objects exist in a web of interdependent cause and effect. A change anywhere in this web causes all of the other objects and phenomenon to either change or disappear, thereby proving their true transient, immaterial nature. Fully recognizing this fact allows one to break from the “wheel of life,” escape rebirth, and achieve liberation.

people, helping others, respecting others, being less selfish. By practicing these, you can gain benefit and happiness.²⁶

One suspects that both of these compassionate lamas are indirectly telling their Western students to save the meditation for a few hundred lives later and focus now on the “practical and realistic aim” of improving their chances for a better rebirth. It’s not a message the Western self wants, or perhaps is even able, to hear.

Dharma Tourists: From Freaks to Yuppies

Another reason that many Kopan students were less than enthusiastic about their Tibetan teachers’ emphasis on compassionate social engagement was that it was a message they had heard before, and left behind. As I described in part 2, many hippie-era travelers headed East after having explicitly distanced themselves from the radical countercultural politics of the 1960s. Though they certainly hadn’t renounced the social justice goals of the Civil Rights Movement, the antiwar movement, and others, a combination of assassinations and right-wing crackdowns had created widespread disillusionment with direct action.²⁷ Many embraced Timothy Leary’s mantra to “turn on, tune in, and drop out” with the last imperative being understood as a call to disengage from the political and turn within. The 1968 Beatles song “Revolution” spoke for many in its association of violent calls for change with “minds that hate” and the admonition to “free your mind instead.” “Revolution” was called for, said the Kathmandu-bound Michael Hollingshead, “not the revolution against the ‘given’ . . . but the revolution within the self” (1973:194). After 1968 people on the Road to Kathmandu were often precisely those who had turned from social to self-transformation.

In the meticulous notebooks that Nepali travel writer Prakash A. Raj kept for most of the 1970s, recording random interviews he conducted with Western tourists in Kathmandu, one sees a sharp rise in the number of Buddhist dharma tourists in the mid-1970s. Germans, Australians,

26. <http://viewonbuddhism.org/compassion.html>.

27. “The course of my life led me to Kopan in 1972. A refugee from war-torn America, fatigued and deeply grieved as a result of the US involvement in the Vietnam war, the political violence, the deaths of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, I needed a long vacation from America. The riotous years of the late ’50s and ’60s were leading me to seek a deeper understanding of life. I didn’t know that the object of my disgust and disillusion would later be identified as samsara.” Barbara Vautier, early student, on the third Kopan course, 1972 (<http://www.mandalamagazine.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/IntimateReflections.pdf>).

Americans, “a Jewish guy from Queens”: rather suddenly in the fall of 1975 Buddha dharma bums seem to be thick on the ground in Freak Street and in the new lodges of Thamel (PAR 1975). Following the Kopan lamas’ lead in outreach to foreigners, other enterprising Tibetan lamas strategically set up shop *in* Thamel where they had easy access to Western seekers (Moran 2004:126). Not to be outdone, in 1982 Kopan Monastery established a branch in Thamel. Originally called the Himalayan Yogic Institute, the organization was later renamed—tellingly—the Himalayan Buddhist Meditation Centre. Similarly, the teachings that Lamas Yeshe and Zopa had begun offering in 1971 quickly came to be known as “meditation courses” among Westerners who now came to Kathmandu specifically for training in meditation. Kathmandu was becoming not just a dharma destination, but a specifically Buddhist meditation destination.

As these students of Buddhism returned home, many of them struggled to keep alive the enthusiasm, motivation, and sense of well-being they had experienced while studying at the lamas’ feet at Kopan. Back in Britain, Vicki Mackenzie recalled, “I meditated every morning . . . trying to keep alive the small flame which had been ignited within. Inevitably the Kopan effect wore off after a few months, and so did the meditations” (1992:20). To keep the “Kopan effect” alive, students did two things. In 1974 they invited charismatic Lama Yeshe on his first overseas tour of various Western countries. Then, from the groups of followers that assembled to hear Lama Yeshe, in 1975 students joined with Kopan Monastery to form the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) which, in turn, oversaw the establishment of “meditation centers” across Europe, North America, Australia, and (eventually) elsewhere. These centers served to keep the “Kopan effect” alive for more experienced students, and to introduce whole new groups of curious seekers to Buddhism. Already by the fall of 1975 some of these new students—people who had encountered Lama Yeshe and/or his students in their home countries—were arriving in Kathmandu to attend Kopan courses (PAR 8/25/75). Kopan Monastery was leading the way in turning Kathmandu into a “stand alone” dharma destination.

The new students who began showing up at Kopan teachings in the mid-1970s were a slightly different breed from the Westerners who had populated earlier courses. The first Kopan students were part of the broad countercultural youth exodus. Hippies, freaks, travelers—however they thought of themselves—had embraced a certain ethos of simplicity that meant adapting to local ways and living on the cheap. A Briton who attended the second Kopan course in 1972 recalled, “There were about a dozen hippies there. . . . I was sure if you turned them all up-

side down you wouldn't get more than one hundred dollars out of the lot of them."²⁸ By 1976 there were around two hundred attendees from around the world. One was Vicki Mackenzie who noted that "most of the people were hippies, who'd made special detours from the hippy trail to meet the lamas. . . . I'd never seen such a sea of Indian cotton in my life" (1992:10).

Unlike most of those attending, Mackenzie represented the new wave of dharma tourists who came to Nepal with the single aim of attending the Kopan course. A tension hung in the air. "I eyed the 'freaks' as they called themselves, and they in turn eyed me. . . . They were agog at my cashmere jumper and Italian knit trousers." Mackenzie concludes reassuringly that "after our initial mutual distaste we grew to like each other" (1992:10), but in fact her sartorial observations point to the beginnings of a demographic shift. The hippie scene lasted longer in places like Kathmandu than in the West but eventually popular culture turned "straight" as reflected in the new "adventure tourist" and anti-freak ethos of Thamel. In her cashmere designer clothes Mackenzie was a standard bearer for an analogous kind of dharma tourist that, by the 1980s, came to dominate the seeker scene in Kathmandu. The tensions Mackenzie experienced persist to this day. Long-term expats I encountered contrasted themselves—people who'd come in the 1960s and 1970s with what they felt was a more sincere interest in Asia and Asians—with the "yuppie Buddhists" who frequently fly in and out of Nepal, making little or no effort to adapt their lifestyles to Asian conditions.

The gradual "hippie" to "yuppie" shift in dharma tourism also represents the growing interest in—and inevitable commercialization of—"Eastern spirituality" in the West (Dodin and Rather 2001). Whereas the first wave of seekers to head down the RTK had access to very few works on Eastern religion (even fewer with scholarly merit [Lopez 2001]), by the mid-1970s a flood of new sources had appeared on the market—from the most esoteric scholarly monographs to the most "out there" New Age pabulum (Korom 2001)—providing endless opportunities for Westerners to whet their appetites for "Eastern wisdom." Without access to this literature hippie-era seekers had often compiled their own eclectic mix of spiritual teachings during their wanderings around the Indian subcontinent. Vicki Mackenzie (she of the cashmere jumper) sneered at this early band of seekers stumbling "through the whole spiritual supermarket trip, shopping at various ashrams around India . . . forever on the great guru hunt" (Mackenzie 1992:47). But her own mystical biography, and that of

28. <http://www.mandalamagazine.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/IntimateReflections.pdf>.

many others, differs only in that she did her spiritual shopping in an armchair at home. From Christianity, to occult “mysteries of the universe,” to spirit mediums, to Chinese mysticism, to Tibetan Buddhism, Mackenzie’s spiritual shopping tour and guru hunt took place largely in books (1992:8–9). Whether hippie or yuppie, both kinds of dharma tourists came to Buddhism after having sampled the fare across the spiritual landscape. Both kinds of magical mystery tours ended up in Kathmandu.

Tourist accommodations in the Bodhanath area nicely illustrate this generational trend. In the 1960s the first Western Buddhist seekers in the area, like Zina Rachevsky, had lived in rented houses or flats near the stupa. Part of Kopan Monastery’s original (and continuing) mandate was to house those enrolled in teachings. As Kopan courses became increasingly popular, and as other teachers and monasteries began catering to Western students, by the late 1970s small tourist lodges opened along the main road to the Bodha stupa. It wasn’t until the mid-1980s that the first hotels approximating Western standards opened and by the early 1990s some local monasteries were running their own posh hotels which were “full of Western Buddhists nearly every night” (Moran 2004:68). Today most astonishing is the massive five-star Kathmandu Hyatt Regency Hotel. Built on thirty-seven acres of formerly agricultural land a five-minute walk west of the Bodhanath stupa, the vast hotel is built “in the traditional Newari style of Nepalese architecture” (according to its website), though from the Buddhist chortens and other decorative motifs in the lobby and around the building, one would never guess that most Newars are Hindu. Many of the hotel’s 280 luxury rooms and suites overlook the Bodhanath area with postcard views of the ancient stupa. In the Hyatt Regency Kathmandu has a hotel suitable for the millionaire jet-setters who now include themselves among the global Tibetan Buddhist sangha.

Conclusion

Google the words “dharma,” “Buddhist,” “travel,” “tour,” and “Nepal” and you’ll quickly find links to dozens of specialized dharma tour companies and travel agencies offering religiously oriented trips to Nepal. With names like Dharma Chakra Holidays, Dharma Journeys, Buddhist Tours, and Dharma Adventures, they offer everything from women’s-only “cultural and spiritual tours” and meditation retreats to “yoga treks,” and “yoga meditation tours.” One company offers “enlightened travel” to Nepal. Its Dharma Journeys Pilgrimage package features lodging at the ultra-luxurious Kathmandu Hyatt Regency and a two-day

“meditation retreat” at Kopan Monastery. (The same search turns up links to Kopan Monastery’s homepage which now offers course registration and payment options online.) A lower-budget tour operator offers “Buddhist Spiritual Tours” featuring two days of meditation at a Kathmandu “meditation center” under the guidance of a local lama. At the high end, Drala Adventures offers a “unique combination of luxurious vacation and transformational travel” in the Kathmandu Valley, “one of the most exotic places on earth.” Their tour combines stays at the Hyatt Regency, lectures, meditation, daily “*cora* practice” (circumambulating the Bodhanath stupa), consultations with physicians specializing in Tibetan medicine, “evening drinks and appetizers,” and dinners at “the best restaurants.” The tour’s “spiritual guides” include Tibetan and Western Buddhist masters and even a genuine European *tulku*, Swiss-born Trinlay Tulku Rinpoche. These guides lead clients “in exploring how to achieve a more peaceful state of mind, be of more benefit to ourselves and others, and cultivate a genuine lasting happiness”: “Drala Adventures: It’s not travel. It’s transformation.”²⁹ It may not be travel but at 9,985 dollars per week, it’s not cheap either.

How big is dharma tourism in Nepal? How many people come to Nepal as dharma tourists? It’s difficult to say, in part because the Nepal government doesn’t disaggregate tourist arrivals in ways that would shed light on the question. For a number of decades “pilgrimage” has been a choice option on the government-issue tourist arrival form, but this category almost entirely reflects South Asian Hindus who come to visit holy spots in the Kathmandu Valley. The secondary literature on tourism in Nepal pays virtually no attention to religious tourism and, on the rare occasions when it does, assumes out of hand that it only applies to Hindu pilgrims and/or Indian tourists (e.g., Chand 2000:106, 245). Aside from the possibility of East Asians visiting Lumbini (the Buddha’s birthplace), Nepali officials and scholars seem largely unaware that Buddhism might be a tourist drawing card for Nepal.

The one exception to this blind-eye phenomenon is a tourist survey conducted in 1997 by H. P. Shrestha (2000) which included questions about tourists’ interests in “learning about religions in Nepal” and in “seeking religious experience.” Asking tourists to circle a number between one (fully disagree) and seven (fully agree), Shrestha found that North Americans, on average, gave a highly affirmative 6.08 / 7 ranking to “learning about religions” while Europeans ranked it 4.94 / 7. As for “seeking religious experience,” North Americans ranked this at 3.89 / 7 and Europeans 3.13 / 7

29. See dralaadventures.com (accessed 12/15/10).

(2000:182–85).³⁰ Shrestha’s survey makes it clear that most Western visitors to Nepal have a rather strong interest in religion but his data tell us nothing about dharma tourism per se. We have no idea how many tourists get off the plane and head straight to Bodhanath for a meditation course and how many have a vague curiosity about religion in Nepal.

That Nepali businesspeople and academics seem virtually unaware of Western dharma tourism in Nepal is partly a reflection of the marginal and stigmatized position that Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhism have in the Nepali national imagination. In a predominantly Hindu country, Buddhism is not central to most people’s lives. But more to the point, in Nepal Tibetans and other ethnic groups with cultural and historical ties to the Tibetan plateau have traditionally been viewed as backward and uncivilized: more than a few Nepalis expressed their annoyance to me over Westerners’ infatuation with all things Tibetan. That sophisticated foreigners would come to Nepal to seek wisdom from a reviled ethnic community whose members (as refugees) aren’t even Nepalis is more than many Nepalis are even willing to entertain. Among the many tourism studies published by Nepalis, almost all include a listing of Nepal’s “tourism products” (mountains, temples, tigers, yetis, Sherpas, etc.) but none of them include Tibetans or Tibetan Buddhism.³¹

This Nepali inattentiveness to the Tibetans among them is all the more ironic given that, for a now vast number of spiritually oriented people around the world, Tibetan Buddhism has emerged as one of Nepal’s “purest products” (Moran 2004:4). Nepal is not only a more easily accessible “tourist’s Tibet” but, with the establishment of a Tibetan state in exile, Nepal has become one of Tibetan Buddhism’s principle spiritual homes (now even more “authentic” than what exists in Chinese-corrupted Tibet). In chapter 1, I outlined how Tibet and the Himalayas have been objects of intense Western spiritual longing and projection for centuries. Even as Tibetans have been violently exiled as refugees around the world, the Tibetan mystique has not diminished. If anything it has only grown as the location of Tibet’s spiritual essence has miraculously shifted from the barren Himalayan landscape into the very bodies of Tibetans—and especially Tibetan Buddhists (Bishop 1989). Nepal’s Bodhanath-focused dharma tourism is an illustration of how, for Westerners, a place where Tibetan (Buddhist) bodies congregate is where their age-old essence lies. Tibetans themselves have become spiritual destinations.

30. Although Shrestha’s survey form actually disaggregates tourists’ interests in Hinduism from that in Buddhism (2000:379, 381), his published report lumps the two together.

31. By contrast, Nepal guidebooks written by foreigners unerringly point to Tibetans as one of Nepal’s prime attractions.

The mutual embrace between Western seekers and Tibetan Buddhists is in fact a crucial part of this larger process of the de-territorialization of Tibet, Tibetans, and Tibetan-ness. Part of what I (and many other studies) have shown is the fortuitous convergence of the West's deep-seated longing for the spiritual essence of the remote Himalayas, with exiled Tibetans' desperate need to keep their culture alive. As a stateless nation with a government in exile officially led by the Dalai Lama, Buddhism has only become more firmly identified with this essence. Luckily for Tibetans, centuries of wishful projection on the part of the West have resulted in enormous reserves of good will toward their plight.

If anything, that good will has grown. I have outlined the Tibetan Buddhist dharma craze that spread throughout the West starting in the 1970s. Other factors have amplified this trend. Ongoing Chinese persecution of (especially Buddhist) Tibetans has spurred Western sympathy and righteous indignation. The Dalai Lama's 1989 Nobel Peace Prize escalated political tensions but also gave unprecedented publicity to the Tibetan plight and clinched his global reputation as a benevolent, godlike character. Orville Schell dates the advent of full-blown Tibet mania in the West (especially in the US) to around 1990, when everything from beer and computer commercials to fashion and sex videos glommed onto images of Tibet and "dharma centers were springing up like Starbucks coffee bars" (2000:39).

If the West has been busy domesticating Tibetan Buddhism, Tibetans have been busy with their own projects of domestication—aimed at the West. Of course we now have large numbers of Tibetan religious figures teaching abroad, intent on spreading (Tibetan) Buddhist dharma and keeping the Tibetan political cause alive. More controversial and interesting is the phenomenon of *tulkus*, or reincarnate lamas, which have been part of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition for centuries. Certain enlightened lamas are able to choose their rebirth (and can be identified by acquaintances from their previous lives). Prior to the 1970s Tibetans almost always chose to reincarnate *as* Tibetans, but in 1976 lamas began reincarnating as Westerners.³² Apparently the first Western *tulku* was Ossian MacLise, the son of hippie expat seekers in Kathmandu; a Spanish toddler (Lama Osel) was officially recognized as Lama Yeshe's reincarnation in 1986 (MacKenzie 1992); and another prominent Tibetan lama was reborn in 1993 in Seattle (where he had taught Buddhist studies at the University of Washington). This idea of transcultural reincarnation has captured the imagi-

32. Historically Tibetans have also used *tulkus* to spread Tibetan Buddhism (and at times Tibetan political power) into places like Mongolia and China (Zablocki 2009:45).

nations of Tibet sympathizers around the world, but the point is that by the 1980s the Tibetan Buddhist diaspora was spreading by *transmigration* as well as migration.³³

Another way Tibetan Buddhists have sought to bring Westerners into their cultural, moral, and political sphere is by increasingly adapting Tibetan Buddhism to Western expectations. Since the 1980s Tibetan religious practitioners have embraced the Western tendency to “psychologize” Buddhism and turn its ritual and devotional disciplines into “self-help” practices with lamas taking on the role of therapists (Pedersen 2001:106). Even the Dalai Lama, though initially reluctant to objectify sacred practices, consented to having Buddhist monks wired to diagnostic equipment in order to study the physiology and health benefits of “meditation.” He saw neuropsychology as a relatively nonpolitical way of highlighting Tibetans’ plight (Davidson and Harrington 2001).³⁴ Since then he has given his blessing to other collaborative neuroscience undertakings designed to link Tibetan philosophy with modern science (even if their underlying epistemologies would seem to be contradictory). Rather than challenge the Western conflation of Buddhism and meditation (that Lama Yeshe resisted), Tibetan Buddhists have seen it as politically expedient to conform to the West’s reductionist preconceptions.

Returning to Bodhanath, we can see a set of characteristics that link Nepal’s Buddha dharma tourism trade with (and within) larger trends in adventure tourism. Not unlike how in the 1970s Nepali state and business interests reimagined their country as a land of tourism “products” and took control of their national “brand,” Tibetans have also objectified their (stateless) nation’s products (Buddhism) and franchised their (de-territorialized) national brand in “dharma centers” and monasteries on every continent. Because Kathmandu can boast perhaps the world’s purest, most authentic version of this Tibetan-Buddhism-as-product, it has attracted a steady and growing stream of foreign seekers intent on finding *real* Tibetans (Tibetan bodies) in something approximating their natural habitat. Just as Nepalis learned the benefits of selling foreigners the dreams that foreigners themselves had projected onto Nepal (Shangri-La, yetis, mountain adventure, tiger-filled jungles, etc.), Tibetans in Nepal (and elsewhere) have embraced a brand largely comprised of elements (meditation, healing, self-improvement) that their non-Tibetan consumers have demanded.

33. Today both of the Western *tulkus* Lama Ossian and Lama Osel have left the monastic life, donned secular clothing, and distanced themselves from their supposed destinies. Though their stories are not finished, these two cases raise questions about the viability of perpetuating Tibetan spiritual lineages in non-Tibetan bodies and cultural contexts.

34. I am grateful to Dylan Lott for this insight.

In these last two chapters I have shown how Nepal pioneered successful business models that transformed deep-seated, persistent, and (largely) Western historical projections into moneymaking enterprises, which have been replicated worldwide. The “adventure tourism” turn of the 1970s combined the West’s historical obsessions with mountaineering and wildlife jungle exploits into new products (trekking and jungle/ecotours) that transformed Nepal’s tourism economy and cemented its place among the global pioneers of adventure/ecotourism. Tibetans in Nepal also tapped into deep streams of Western desire for meaning and healing long focused (and fantasized) on the Himalayas and Himalayan peoples. First at Kopan Monastery, and now through countless initiatives modeled on Kopan, Tibetans transformed Tibetan Buddhism into a branded product and peddled it worldwide.

Like the moneyed adventure tourists who come to Nepal looking to purchase a product (adventure) and services (guides, hotels, restaurants), dharma tourists come to Nepal in search of a “pure product” (Tibetan Buddhists/Buddhism) and services (lamas, hotels, restaurants). One group sought (and paid for) recreation and renewal while the other sought (and paid for) re-creation and enlightenment. For both groups Nepal now serves as an enchanted, exotic destination in which to find, experience, and even heal the selves that (they believe) the modern West has constrained or even sickened. The countercultural longings that inspired Madam Blavatsky’s Tibetan fantasies, James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon*, Carl Jung’s and Timothy Leary’s (mis)appropriations of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and many others, are the same yearnings that continue to draw tourists to Nepal in search of the experience, wisdom, and healing they cannot find at home.

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