



## A Taste of Nepal

By Wanda Vivequin

You definitely don't need to be a mountaineer or hard-core hiker to enjoy Nepal.

Just ask any of the 10 Edmonton women who came along on an almost three-week long cultural trip I led in October/November called "A Taste of Nepal."

Chances are they will probably give you an answer you would least expect from a country better known for being an ultimate playground for adventure seekers and home to the highest mountain in the world, Mt Everest.

"Well, we did play bridge with a backdrop of Himalayas," Hazel Elborne, Beverley Matthieson, Dorothy McQuisten and Barb Gauf would tell you.

The card-playing quartet notched up games in some of the most beautiful places imaginable surrounded by flowers, terraced hillsides, lakes, rivers, quaint villages, rhinoceros-filled jungles, and historic wooden architecture.

While bridge was certainly not the focus of the trip, it did provide the perfect way to start or finish a day of cultural experiences that have created memories to last a lifetime.

"I climbed my own personal Everest," says Joan Ohe of the walk to Balthali Hill Resort. The resort is located on a hillock overlooking the terraced hills of the Kathmandu Valley with a full line-up of the world's highest mountains barely 80 kilometres to the north.

From the pages of her diary Ohe wrote:

***"With a lot of encouragement from Wanda and Raju, I finally dragged myself to the top and fell into bed."***

***"The next morning I felt fine and when I saw the breathtaking 360 degree view, I would have done it all over again,"*** adds Ohe who was suffering from a mild stomach

bug and dehydration on the day and is already talking about going back to Nepal with her husband and friends.

For Ohe and her roommate Susan Draper, both in their sixties and dubbed by the rest of their group as “Chip and Dale,” the trip to Nepal was the culmination of months of planning, anticipation, packing and repacking.

Never once, in spite of all the bad news and travel warnings coming out about Nepal during the lead up to their departure did these women waver in their decision to visit a country so poor that many of its people live on less than one US dollar a day.

Sandwiched in between Tibet/China and India, this tiny land-locked country of 27 million people could comfortably fit into Alberta four times.

The women participating in the tour had a combined age of well over 600 years and came from all walks of life; retired teachers, pharmacists, board executives, ex-farmers, office executives, ex-census takers and administrators.

Some were ready to take up the physical challenges available in the form of countryside walks, while others were happy to relax and experience the culture on offer around each corner of the trails, tracks, streets and alleys of this surprising and incredible country.

The itinerary was organized to provide the travelers with a little bit of everything; city life, country life, culture, religion, walking, a school visit, music and dance, arts and crafts, culture and new culinary experiences.

It included; time in the capital city Kathmandu, its teeming streets and famous historic places, countryside retreats that offered opportunities to experience village life and culture, an intimate look at the textiles of Nepal through the eyes of a talented young fabric artist, a visit to Chitwan National Park with its rhinoceroses, elephants and incredible bird life and time to shop for curios and world famous pashmina shawls.

Made up of all women, the group provided my Nepali guide Raju Taludhar, a talented textile artist, and myself with nine new mothers and one sister. Raju’s talents as a yoga and meditation teacher created the additional bonus of gentle stretching and meditative sessions in tranquil locations each morning.

Two and three nights in each place minimized the amount of packing and unpacking we had to do and kept the pace relaxed. Using almost every mode of transport including, bus, taxi, elephant, ox-cart, plane, boat and feet certainly provided for some humorous and life changing moments.

From the diary of Bonnie Sharplin:

***I climbed up an elephant by stepping onto her trunk! She lifted her head and I got pulled up onto her back. I made a spectacle of myself but it was a great experience. I felt euphoric, never in my life expecting to have such an experience.***

From a diary entry by Bonnie Sharplin after leaving Begnas Lake Resort located where we woke to the cheerful singing of fisherman as they set their nets:

***Said farewell to paradise, and all the wonderful people who took such good care of us, then boarded our bright blue boats with the cheery yellow seats and red trim to be paddled back across the lake for the final time. In silence we traveled along savoring the quiet, the lake and the scenery - what a memorable way to conclude this three day idle.***

For most of the group, the experience of meeting the Nepali people had a profound impact. Impromptu invitations into local houses for tea during some of our walks provided a glimpse into the very different and difficult lives of these gracious people.

From the diary of Joan Ohe:

***Nepali people are gracious, polite and friendly. We felt welcome everywhere, even when we knew they must have had their fill of tourists asking the same dumb questions over and over.***

The contrasts between our own lives in Canada and those of the many people we met in Nepal provided everyone with experiences that left lasting impressions and created inner transformations. These are best captured in some of the words written in travel diaries and emails to friends.

In their own words:

From Joan Ohe:

***I was enchanted with the beautiful saris most of the women wore. They are feminine and graceful on women of any size, shape or age, and come in every color imaginable. How lovely those clear, bright colors look with the women's dark skin tones and shiny black hair, and how they brighten even the poorest, dustiest village.***

***They are worn everywhere, from harvesting rice in terraced fields to perching sideways on the backs of motorcycles in Kathmandu. One size fits all and they never appeared to be rumpled or dirty. I wonder, is it possible to fall in love with an article of clothing?***

From the diary of Dorothy McQuisten:

***Kathmandu: A city with streets teeming with people, honking cars and motorcycles, stray dogs and the odd cow. Drivers and walkers, even tiny kindergarten children,***

*have an amazing ability and agility to avoid each other Even the stray dogs have a sixth sense on when to cross the road.*

From the diary of Susan Draper comes the following entry after one of our walks through the countryside:

*We ambled through the unbelievably beautiful and interesting countryside where we had countless people encounters. There were people working very hard in the fields. Women were carrying huge bundles of straw. One of our group asked one woman if she could try and lift the bundle - no way could she lift it!! It was way too heavy!*

*There were children walking home from school. They would politely say "Namaste" and then cover their mouths as they giggled at the sight of us old women from Canada with our funny straw hats. There were a few older women who passed us by and had a giggle or two also!!*

From the diary of Bonnie Sharplin after visiting the astonishing Buddhist pilgrimage site of Boudhanath:

*Boudhanath: what to say? This huge structure, prayer flags by the thousands, saffron design decorating the inverted bowl. We were there before any other tourists and joined the worshippers who were traveling clockwise (3 times around for good luck), fingering prayer beads, an audible low rumble – the sound of praying, spinning of prayer wheels housed around the perimeter of the stupa.*

From the diary of Lea Cook:

*Watching the sun come up over the mountains was the first time in a long time that I felt absolute peace, and all I have to do is think of that morning and it comes back to me.*

From Susan Draper:

*We visited the place where the locals shop. We went by local bus which was an experience in itself. There was a totally different atmosphere than, let's say in the tourist area of Kathmandu where people are besieged by relentless hawkers. We had many enjoyable encounters with people selling their fruits, vegetables, fish, wares and skills (shoe repairmen, sewing machine operators etc.) Everyone was very friendly but not pushy at all. I found some beautiful Nepalese cotton for my quilting friend in Canada.*

The last words come from Joan Ohe:

*Nepal is a country to experience with all the senses. The sounds of bells ringing, horns beeping and goats bleating; the smells of incense, candle wax, garbage and diesel fuel; the sights of incredibly beautiful scenery, brilliantly colored saris and wonderful*

*architecture; the soft texture of pashmina shawls and the feeling of receiving a tika (blessing) on the forehead from a holy man; the taste of curried vegetables, Everest beer and apple oatmeal, are memories to last a lifetime.*