

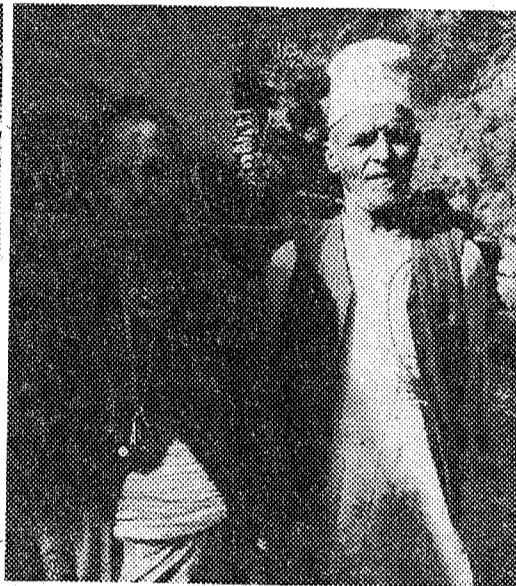
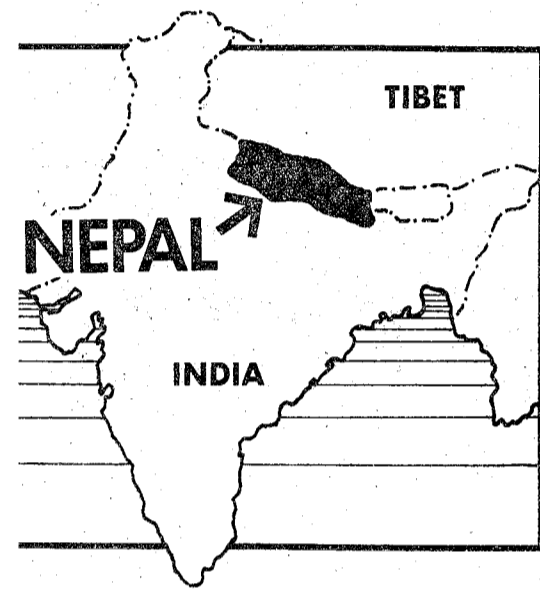
# TRAVEL

with STUART INNES

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**NEPAL:** Berwyn Lewis goes trekking from hotel comfort to sheer adventure

## The excitement really begins at the airport



**K**ATHMANDU'S international airport must be one of the strangest in the world. With its collection of flapping tents, duty-free shopping and anti-terrorist procedures, it establishes immediately upon arrival this is not just a feudal Hindu-Buddhist kingdom.

It is home to more than 16m people, host to thousands of tourists and trekkers every year who come to climb the highest mountains in the world, the Himalayas, and it is a land of contrasts — elephant "taxis", 80 p.c. illiteracy, a Royal Family which reigns over a one-party system and controls a media monopoly.

Before a trek to the remote Nepalese villages in the north-east, the Gauri Shankar area, with Australian Himalayan Expeditions, it is essential to see Kathmandu, preferably by bicycle which can be hired for eight to ten rupees a day (about 50c).

The glaring Buddha eyes of Bodanath Temple which overlooks the airport is a short pushbike ride across town. Jets come and go but the eternally vigilant eyes painted on the white dome of the temple remain indifferent. They are focussed on Nirvana, not on the camera-slung and back-pack brigades which straggle through the temple grounds every day.

Down by the river Pashupatinath Temple is the site of milling crowds of locals. Most are alive but on this particular day there are a few dying and dead gently placed on the river banks from which people throw blossoms, rice and money into the water. It's the Day Of The Goddess of Learning on which children start school.

On the other side of town, the famous Monkey Temple which, true to its name, seems to be headquarters for the world's most thieving and mischievous monkeys, overlooks the golden domes and thatched rooftops of Kathmandu.

Don't take any food there. The monkey squads will instantly detect all biscuits, candy and fruit and will follow you, leaping from statue to statue until they get their chance to snatch the food. You can also run

the risk of a bite, a very unpleasant experience in Kathmandu, where the possibility of catching rabies is a fact of life for dog, monkey and human.

The best time to climb the steep stairway to the Monkey Temple is around sunset when, depending on the time of year, the view of the sun setting over the snow-capped mountains which crown Kathmandu is spectacular.

We were heading for these mountains the following morning with our guide, Laxman Subedi, a Kathmandu lawyer and a tribe of 17 cooks, porters, Sherpas and hands provided by Australian Himalayan Expeditions.

A last mammoth-size Western breakfast in our last oasis of hot-running water and mod cons at the Everest Sheraton Hotel and we were boarding our bus by 7 a.m. to the sounds of extended bugle calls from the nearby Gurka Academy and the crowing of roosters.

Adorned with its frilly curtains, good luck charms, Sanskrit graffiti and piled with bags the bus, it seemed, was driven on horn-blowing power accompanied by the beating of a drum down the back among the pots, pans and spirit stove of what was to become our mobile kitchen at all our campsites.

Soon we were swaying wildly up steep mountain roads lined with people, scampering goats, chickens, piglets and children. The children tried to jump aboard the bus whenever it slowed down.

We reached our first campsite, Kabre Mainapokhari at 1836 metres, a field of bright yellow mustard flowers. The tents were erected by the Sherpas, a delicious dinner of pappadams (spicy Indian fried wafers), curry, lentils, rice and salad appeared as though by magic in our "mess tent" where we ate and chatted until the call of our sleeping bags became impossible to resist.

The next morning we set off for Jonujarsa, acutely aware of the porters burdening themselves with all our heavy possessions plus the tents, sleeping bags and the kitchen.

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