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Footsteps in the land of giants

From the Everest Sheraton to mountain monasteries and chanting Buddhist nuns, Nepal, high in the Himalayas, is an unforgettable land. **BERWYN LEWIS** takes a trek through this feudal kingdom.

NEPAL, the Hindu-Buddhist kingdom ringed by the world's biggest mountain range, the Himalayas, home to 16 million people and host to thousands of tourists and trekkers every year, has the strangest international airport.

With its collection of flapping tents, duty-free shopping and anti-terrorist procedures, it immediately establishes that Kathmandu is not just a time warp — feudal kingdom and elephant "taxis" notwithstanding. It is a land of contradictions, 80 per cent illiteracy and a Royal Family media monopoly which includes ownership of the television station.

Before setting off on a trek to the remote Nepalese mountain villages of the Gauri Shankar area in the north east with Australian Himalayan Expeditions it was essential to rent bicycles for eight to 10 rupees a day (about 50c) and pedal around town.

A short ride away were the glaring Buddha eyes of Bodanath Temple, overlooking the airport. Pashutinath Temple down by the river was the site of milling crowds, mostly alive, but some were dead. Those alive were throwing blossoms, rice and money into the river to celebrate the day of the Goddess of Learning on which children start school.

The Monkey Temple, a gruelling climb up

It's not the long hair, or the drugs, or the unshaven faces; it's the all-leather walking boots that I find galling!



beggar- and monkey-lined stairs provided a spectacular view of Kathmandu's sprawling mudhouse suburbs and gold and silver rooftops, as well as the mountains for which we headed the next morning after a last mammoth Western breakfast in the Everest Sheraton.

We left at 6 am, a foggy and ominous morning announced by crowing roosters and extended bugle calls from the nearby Ghurka Academy. Our bus, adorned with frilly curtains, good luck charms, Sanskrit graffiti and piled with bags, porters, cockerels and Sherpas was driven, it seemed, on horn-blowing power accompanied by the beating of a drum down the back among pots, pans and a spirit stove — our camp kitchen.

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

We camped at 1,836 metres that night in a field of bright yellow mustard flowers and next morning set out for Jonujarsa, acutely aware of the porters burdening themselves with all our heavy possessions.

That night we listened to the Marcos

"victory" on Radio Australia in our mess tent as we waited for a delicious dinner of freshly picked spinach, cauliflower curry, dahl-baht (rice and dahl) and fresh mandarins.

The real walking, puffing and panting began after crossing the Bhotekosi River the next day. We arrived at the Sersapu Prabi School in Doikha. The classrooms emptied — they had never seen tourists before. The despairing teacher coaxed the children into a love song and a performance of a village dance as eagles soared above stands of bamboo and rhododendron bushes.

Our next camp site, Sakhnidanda, was situated on a jut of land which extended like a diving board into a motionless ocean of mountain waves.

We walked on past farms of meticulous terraces, buffalo hauling wooden ploughs and locals bearing huge cargoes of cattle feed on their heads. When we arrived at the junction of the Suridovan and Bhotekosi Rivers, furious washing rituals began. The trees suddenly blossomed with socks, knickers and t-shirts and the locals watched in amazement.

Each night we were treated to magnificent meals described by our guide, Laxman

Subedi, a lawyer from Kathmandu, as "worship of the stomach".

The two-person tent I shared became increasingly welcome each night despite its jumble of sweaters, moisturisers, cameras, vitamin pills, books and rolls of film, as well as essentials — thermal underwear, boots, sandshoes, down jackets, hats and sunscreens.

We had been beyond telephones, cars and shops for 10 days. Sunsets over pink-tinted snow, moon rises over mountaintops and waterfalls. Village people became our landmarks. In some areas the houses were almost model homes, thatched rooftops covered in ripening pumpkin and corn and in the immaculately swept courtyards pretty women in saris sorted trays of millet, corn and soya beans. In other villages disease, starvation and a sense of despair prevailed.

One of the highlights was camping at Bigugomp, a monastery of maroon-robed nuns surrounded by poles of fluttering Buddhist prayer flags. That night we listened to their chanting and to Radio Australia's news of tear-gas and helicopters surrounding Marcos's Malacanang Palace.

Finally the prospect of cold beer and Coca-Cola loomed as we approached the mountain town of Barabise on the Sunkosi River. Its dusty main street seemed bewildering after the peaceful mountain trails.

The next day we headed by bus to Kathmandu and the unadulterated luxury of bathroom and bed instead of a freshly dug hole in the ground and sleeping bag.

A last look around Kathmandu revealed what is left of the 1960s freaks of Freak Street and the crumbling facades of the magnificent temples in Mangal Bazaar as well as shopping for Tibetan carpets at Kathmandu's Tibetan refugee camp.

Nepal Connections: Trekking With Australian Himalayan Expeditions, from \$2,258 all inclusive, 377 Sussex Street, Sydney, 2000, phone (02) 264-3366.

Extended stay details: Everest Sheraton — from \$30 a night; Kathmandu Guest House — from \$6 a night.