

Editors Note: The US Department of State posted the following note on the Web.

Remember to look both ways when crossing!!]

American citizens should be extremely cautious when traveling overland in Nepal, especially by bus. In general, roads are in very poor condition and lack basic safety features. Many mountain and hill roads are impassable during monsoon season (June-September) due to landslides, and are very hazardous even in the best weather. Avoid travel on night buses - fatal accidents are frequent. In the Kathmandu valley, roads are congested. Not only is traffic badly regulated, the volume of vehicles on the roads is increasing by 15 percent a year. Many drivers are neither properly licensed nor trained. Vehicles are poorly maintained. Sidewalks and pedestrian crossings are non-existent in most areas, and drivers do not yield the right-of-way to pedestrians. Of the 4,500 traffic-related deaths in 1997, two-thirds were pedestrians.



Originally, four of us were haphazardly planning for the Tamur; Rob Lesser, Guy Baker, Dave Manby and myself: leftovers from a Karnali descent. Yet on the Karnali I'd noted differences between these personalities. It was like three people going to watch a hockey game for their own various reasons: Guy to anticipate the fights, Dave to watch the hockey and, Rob to see a zamboni. Just the manner in which these three dressed pronounced the gulf between them: Guy, styled himself with wrap around yellow sunglasses and had various subdivisions of his body perforated with jewelry. He looked so much like a model fresh from a commercial that on his visa application he'd simply torn a look-alike picture from a magazine ad and pasted it on the photo blank. Dave bedecked himself in a multicolored patched sports jacket I'd had tailored for him ten years before in Turkey. To complement this anticomplementary attire he'd found a likewise patchwork pair of

shorts. Rob dressed himself in Patagonia cloth right down to skivvies and socks. That was our line-up: two variously eccentric Englishmen, an all American boy, (and, myself who wore a color uncoordinated Goodwill outfit; yellow tag special; Oct. 21, 1997). If the descent of the Tamur proved inadequate entertainment, surely these paddling anomalies would fill the void.

The river itself drains Kanchenjunga--which is really the highest mountain in the world but since it is so hard to pronounce no one admits it. It would be a descent from vertical to horizontal geology; from mountain air to the stench of burning garbage; from Buddhist to Hindu influence; from frosty nights to baking temperatures; from yaks to water buffalo; from chickens to ducks. Word of mouth pegged it as "one of the best whitewater runs in the world," ad nauseam. Five days worth (whitewater, not nauseam). On our descent, I planned on seeing the backs of all three of these better-than-me paddlers being trashed in holes that I hopefully--from their mistakes--could avoid. But such wasn't to be. During an ungodly wait in line at the permit office in Kathmandu, Dave and Guy wandered off only to learn from a mutated German rumor, that because of low water, the Tamur had been demoted to a class three. But what I think happened was, the two wiener schnitzels who had just come from the river couldn't count past three in any other language (like myself). In any case, on the spur of the second--and for the first time since being together, Rob, Dave and Guy all agreed on one thing: They

hadn't traveled to Nepal to dawdle in class three. They changed their permits for the Marsyandi. Stoically, I stuck to my guns. My heart was set on the Tamur, and if the river really was class drei then I certainly didn't have to think zwei times about an eins-person descent.

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With my hiking permit in hand, I headed back to my hotel and contemplated the obstacles: I had to quickly learn some Nepali-- a written language that looks like something stuck and baked in a laser printer. Thus spoken, it was all stuck and baked gobbledegook to me, which wasn't going to help me shuttling my kayak between taxis and busses, and having to hire porters.

My second worry was that the trip wasn't exactly legal. Although the Tamur is slated to go commercial in '98 that didn't mean the door was open for private parties like myself to descend it. My rubber-stamped piece of paper allowed me to hike to the river--and back. It didn't say I could run the river, but it didn't say I couldn't run the river either. Or, if I really wanted to play by these arbitrary rules what I needed was a costly expedition permit, yet on the other sleighting hand, no private party had been turned away from the river (or at least had been caught). As

an American I never was good at interpreting legal grey matters such as this one (which probably explains why so many confused Americans own so many guns).

I imagined the conversation I might have with the police at checkpoints.

POLICE: So you are hiking from Basantapur to Dobhan.

ME: Yes.

POLICE: And back.

ME: Yes.

POLICE: With a boat?

ME: What boat? Oh that! Well, I'll be gosh darned. I hadn't noticed I accidentally packed it.

POLICE: Ha! You crazy westerners! Always kidding around. Hope you've also accidentally packed loads of baksheesh.

So as I got closer to my hotel, I began thinking it might be nice to share some of this misery with company. And, if someone did accompany me then there wouldn't be the mystery surrounding any accidental death I might encounter with headlines that would read:

ENIGMA OF LONE BOATER'S DEATH DEEPENS

Kayaker's Patagonia shorts found on water buffalo near Bay of Bengal.

.... Which would really be a mystery because I don't wear anything Patagonia. I can't afford it. Not even factory seconds. Have you ever priced that stuff?

So on the off chance that I could find another pariah kayaker looking for a trip, I stopped into the Equator Expeditions office and told Pauline Sanderson, co-owner, that I was leaving the next day for the Tamur and if she heard of anyone who wanted to do it, they were welcome to join me.

Ten minutes later there was a knock on my hotel door. It was Pauline. She informed me she was joining me. I began to stammer.

"You *did* say *anyone*," she said.

"But..."

"That won't be an issue," she explained, "I'm married."

I began to stutter.

"I'm a class three boater but I can hang on in class four. Anyway, that won't be an issue either since it'll only be class three... Please let me come, I haven't had a break in two months.... I'll get us to and from the river if you can get me down it."

I began to sputter.

She continued: "I'm also an ex-lawyer. I'll can take care of any legal matters that arise, like reducing our death sentences to life in prison for doing a river that we aren't necessarily supposed to be on."

I began to think. "You'll be ready tomorrow?"

"By all means."

We shook hands and I began to pack.

Half-an-hour later I was ready.

With nothing to do but wait I began wandering around Thamel, one of Kathmandu's tumors and hitching post for budget travelers. My first time around to Nepal on original tread was in 1979. I remembered a short conversation I had on a hotel roof with a not so fellow American from Brooklyn who had just arrived to both Nepal and the hotel roof. He was fresh out of Peace Corps training and quickly into our conversation I asked, "Let me get this straight; you're from *Brooklyn* and you've come to tell *these* people how to live?" For some reason he immediately stopped talking to me. In any case, seven years worth of later I held him personally responsible for the change that had come to the country, so much so that I swore I'd never visit Nepal again...

What happened between '79 and '86 was profound change; the transpiration between '86 and the present was radical mutation--especially in Thamel. The

district had gone vertical. Sun-drenched tea gardens were all but extinct and what few outdoor restaurants that hadn't been built on now lay in the multi-story cold shadows of those that had. Another metamorphose was the handicrafts. Not that Kathmandu was ever handicraft deficient, but the quality of crafts had vastly improved. For example, locally knitted sweaters no longer contained manure in the wool that if watered would sprout and grow the seeds that were also in the wool to maturity--seeds that you could get hung for in Singapore.

Communication, too, had improved. Before, phoning out was like trying to connect with life on distant planets. But now, in every office I passed, I saw computer after computer. Today, the information age is leveling the playing field making it possible for hormone-crazed eleven year-old Nepali boys to surf the web and ogle over the same naked women that American boys loose their sight over.

However, of all the change, the population increase snatched the cake. But wanting to be optimistic and letting all these people have opportunities in life (despite the traffic jams they will have to endure to get to their opportunities) I began noting job openings.

Population control expert. Job description: Must be able to feign population control but not actually control it as that would quickly eliminate job.

Dog Catcher. Job description: Catch and destroy all dogs. Benefits: Will be able to work from your home daily.

Trash collector. Job description: Must be able to identify trash. Translating language trash was written in is not necessary but will add hours of enjoyment to the job.

Heavy load long shifter. Job description: Must be able to pick up large objects with penis in front of tourists. Females need not apply.

Proof reader. Job description: Must be able to correctly spell items on menus such as “frid igs” or “child beer.”

Etiquette school for Israeli tourists. Job description: Must teach Israelis notions of queues and politeness. Job comes with lifetime supply of alcohol.

Yet of all these opportunities, the latest fad was the one that Nepal hardly needed any more of: hucksters selling raft trips. You could hardly eat a meal or check into a hotel without being harassed. Even the free-lancers on the street sold them and in a whispering contraband tone of voice they asked: "You wish to buy

rafting trip? I have good rafting trip for you. No? Change money? How about my sister? No? Marijuana? Tiger Balm?"

Because of its popularity, rafting now pumps more money into the local economy than tiger balm sales and due to its skyrocketing success Nepal is one of the few Asian economies whose currency did not recently collapse--a startling fact that I just made up. Yet because of this popularity, the Sun Kosi, the Marsyandi, the Kali Gandaki, and the Seti are now so overrun that their white sandy beaches have become what sandboxes are to cats. Fortunately, the monsoons cleanse the rivers each year washing all garbage safely out of sight into the plains of India where it will hardly disturb the tourists in Nepal....OK, so you detect a tone of sarcasm but if something isn't said then what's to stop DisneyWorld in ten more years coming in and purchasing the entire country?

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The next afternoon, after shuttling our kayaks to the bus station and lashing them aloft our bus, we boarded, and sitting in the two seats behind the driver's cage that Pauline had specifically reserved, I commented, "You call *these* the best seats?"

"Absolutely." She said, "Look at our leg room!"

"Do you sit in the front row at horror shows?"

Moments later our driver swaggered aboard, and slipping on a pair of thin leather Italian driving gloves, he gazed out over us mortal passengers as if he was Beelzebub observing a new batch of arrivals. After a condescending "huuuh!" he sat, shuffled into his seat, tested the steering wheel, started, raced and blew the clinkers from the exhaust, grabbed the shift knob and, as if entering a mortal combat with the engine, he jammed the shift forward, popped his foot off the clutch and from that moment on we never slowed, and Dharan, our interim destination, became like a distant planet, its gravitational pull speeding us forward at an ever-increasing speed. The only problem was there were approximately two-thousand hair-pin corners and fifteen hours between us and Dharan.

Pauline, quick to notice my concern said, "Don't worry, if he was a bad driver he wouldn't be here now. He'd be dead."

"What if it's his first time?"

"But just look at him!" She marveled, "He seems to know exactly what he's doing."

"What passing on blind corners?"

"Maybe he's psychic. Maybe he knows no one is com...Jes...Ahhh!...That was close! I, um, don't think he's psychic after all."

Worse still, that evening--thanks to el nino--it grew dark. I thought night might help B'bub discern oncoming headlights around blind corners but even this didn't equate. I told Pauline, once a good catholic, to dust off her saints while I went to work invoking every deity from every religion I could think of. "Please Gods," I prayed, "I don't care how hard the Tamur is, just get me to it alive, ANYTHING but this driver!"

In terrifying time, the divinities delivered us temporarily from evil onto the blessed flat terai, and there, we switched drivers. Of course I didn't identify the other driver until he sat in the driver's seat. Up until then he'd been a:

General bus go-for. Job description: Must occasionally boss conductor around to show superiority. Must be able to engage driver in stimulating conversation enabling driver to remove his attention from small annoyances like on-coming vehicles. Also must be able to climb out of moving bus up onto roof to pilfer passenger's bags without being swept off roof while bus passes under low tree branches. High count of hormones required.

B'bub fell quickly asleep on the engine cowling, leaving our new driver alone at the helm, merrily grinding gears. The road was cornerless and at first it

appeared our new man seemed lacking in death wishes. I almost nodded off as I balanced on the edge of sleep for the next few hours. With our leg room I might even have slipped into real sleep if the seats hadn't felt like they were chiseled out of granite. Once, shifting positions to let another part of my body take a turn at going numb, I cracked open an eye only to see the driver's head nod down then jerk up. I bolted upright, but I was quickly relieved when he woke himself thoroughly by opening the window, standing, and poking his head and shoulders into the rush of night air.

Concerned, I stayed awake and a short while later he sat back, raced the bus to a new land speed record, popped the engine into neutral and began coasting. As the bus slowed, so did the driver's consciousness. At about fifteen miles an hour, his head slumped once more; around five he twitched back awake. I contemplated waking Pauline, but she looked so peaceful asleep and I didn't want to disturb her. Besides, I thought, just like B'bub, this driver can't be all *that* bad as he too remains alive. Surely he knows what he's doing....

After three or so more bursts of speed and some quick cat naps he stood once more and thrust his head out the window. But this didn't last long and soon he reverted to his coasting nano-naps again. I thought: "Maybe I should go talk to him." But if I could navigate around the cage and lean over the more permanently sleeping B'bub, what would I say to the driver? If I tapped him on the shoulder

maybe I'd scare the bejabbers out of him and cause us to wreck. Again I debated waking Pauline. Maybe he'd like her tapping him on the shoulder instead. Besides, she could at least say something to him in Nepali.

The driver raced the bus once more, this time almost heroically. Gazing behind me, I took inventory of the other passengers. No one was awake; no one was concerned, so, I thought, why should I worry? I turned around and my heart tried leaping out of its rib cage: I've never known such terror: In my forward-attention's absence I had become the last person awake on the bus: The driver was sagged over the wheel, fast asleep. I wished desperately to close my eyes too but there wasn't enough lid to stretch across the bulges of my eye balls that now probably looked more like pickled onions. A tree we should have passed on the right swept in then out of our headlights and, as it brushed past on our left, we plunged off the shoulder down a ten-foot bank and, in the middle of a country that boasts the highest mountains on earth, we landed...in a swamp.

The impact threw Pauline into the driver's cage--which probably knocked him awake. It certainly woke Pauline. As the bus jarred to a stop in a dissonance of noise, there were staccato screams and a burst of hissing steam from the engine.

The driver shook his head and when he at last turned and I could study his face I swear he looked content. His expression read; "I just beat my old record by twenty minutes!" I thought B'bub, who was extracting himself from the dashboard,

would be livid but he said nothing, not even "Why'd you do that *you* knucklehead?" I turned to look at the passengers. Their faces were blank slates. Obviously here, bus drivers falling asleep is purely providence. In America though, this wreck would have been a gold mine. Besides Pauline's head which had started to bleed, there were miraculously, no other injuries. We could have all sued for severe emotional trauma and collected millions for the rest of our lives living happily ever after. But not in Nepal. We weren't even given refunds. And, we were about to be knee-deep in a swamp just to get back to the road.

As I climbed onto the bus roof and untied our kayaks and gear, our driver joined me and undid a couple of benches. These he threw into the water placing them end to end for the passengers to walk on. Although the benches were oriented towards the road they were thirty feet short of dry land and were nothing but a gangplank into a swamp--a swamp that made all others I'd been in impostors. This swamp was a pathogen convention center and yellow fever and malaria mosquitos were probably the least fiendish of evil forces breeding there. The water was brown and soupy, filled with leeches and in general smelled like a pile of athletic socks needing a wash.

In the meantime other busses had stopped, both east and west bound, giving us a choice of continuing or returning. As we reached the road neither Pauline or I

could decide if the wreck was a good or bad omen. Was her wound a small but necessary blood sacrifice? Or was it just a taste of bigger injuries to come?

After dressing the cut with iodine, I dug out her helmet and said, "Here, see if this still fits."

"Why didn't you suggest this a half an hour ago?" She asked.

"Because your head wasn't swollen then. Besides, I didn't want to wake you."

Pauline nursed the helmet over her cut.

Snuggled in place, she shrugged and said, "It'll work: Shall we continue?"

We loaded our gear onto an eastbound bus and took residence, this time, in the very rear.

As it was, we arrived in Dharan at five A.M.--ahead of schedule. Despite the early hour, the street was a hive of activity. We carried our kayaks a block to the Basantapur bus. This bus was shorter and more beat-up than our crashed bus--before it crashed. On its side was painted, "Swastika Travels." A man sold us tickets from a booth that looked like a Punch and Judy theater. We requested sanctuary in the rear.



It remained dark when we left. The engine struggled as we headed back into the mountains. The bus was jammed. Although I couldn't see our driver I did try monitoring his activity. But over the drone of passenger chatter, it was impossible to distinguish what he was up to. As far as I could tell, both the brake and throttle peddles were renegeing on their responsibilities, at best all they seemed to be doing was changing the whine of our forward momentum. As we inched uphill, gravity became this bus's worst enemy: downhill, I knew it would become ours. But I was gun-shy and needn't have worried. Whoever was up there behind the wheel, kept us securely on the road.

Dawn came and I charted our progress on a map that Marco Polo must have transcribed in his feeble-minded old age. After four hours of jolting, both the road and our speed diminished. We went from about four miles per hour to four hours per mile. Although riding a bucking bronco would have been far more relaxing, I still wasn't complaining about the driver. Even though the road completely disappeared at times he at least kept the bus where the road was supposed to be. Good old Swastika Travels. They only hire the best.

After leaving Kathmandu--twenty-two hours, three bus rides and one bus crash later, we finally arrived in Basantapur. Porters swarmed our equipment. I was glad I had Pauline for it was her difficult task to pick three competent porters for our three day walk to the river. I didn't envy her but a deal was a deal. My job, I gloated to myself, getting her down such an easy river would be a cinch. Carefully I watched her, thinking she might conduct job interviews, but instead in her eye was the look of a woman on a shopping spree. Sweeping her gaze through the crowd she announced, "You, you and you."

I was stunned.

"What's was wrong with the guy already holding my boat?" I wanted to know.

"He's not very nice."

"And that one clutching our bag?"

"He'd rob us."

"And that one?"

"Lazy."

"Then why these three?"

"They're friendly."

"How can you tell?"

"I just can. Don't question me."

Their names were Dopasaan, Lockman, and Teg and if they were friendly, I couldn't tell. In fact Teg, a dead ringer for Peter Lorre, looked more adept for serial killing than portering. But whether Pauline's snap judgement was sixth sense or pure luck it didn't matter. For our march to the river, we couldn't have had better companions.

The walk traversed along ridge tops through meadows and in and out of rhododendron forests. The first morning Lockman woke us at six-thirty and insisted we get up. We insisted on sleeping some more. Five minutes later he returned with a cup of tea. This time, grumpy but subservient, we complied to his wishes, rose, ate and stepped from our tea house. Awaiting us was a crystal clear panorama of Himalayas; Everest to the west, Kanchenjunga on the east--and a whole lot of malcontent geology in-between. An hour later, while we would have otherwise still been asleep, the mountains dissolved into the mists.

As we hiked I began brushing up on essential Nepali words that I'd learned each time before when I'd visited the country. These were: Hello, goodbye, dahl bat, fast, very, good, how much and, boat--all the words a kayaker needs to know. With these you can fabricate such key phrases as:

*Dahl bat fast goodbye.* Meaning: Quick! Where the heck's the outhouse?

*Boat very fast goodbye?* --Is the river hard?

*How much hello goodbyes?* --How many children do you have?

Once I tried constructing a question that included every Nepali word I knew, feeling that in doing so I would be regarded as an extremely learned and sophisticated person. Unable to understand the response I received I asked Pauline with her limited but-knew-more-than-me Nepali to translate. She said: "The old man says that it wouldn't be compromising your intelligence to call you a moron."

Often we were asked if we were married. Instead of letting this slide Pauline would thoroughly baffle anyone who was foolish enough to ask by trying to explain that, well, *she* was married but no, pointing to me, I *wasn't* her husband.

But her answer always failed to parry off the next question: "How many children do you have?"

When we told them, "none," they would offer us a child or two in consolation. I was hardly sure of what to do with all the kids if we did take them, however, with only three cans of tuna, our menu *was* lacking in protein.

On the third morning we at last saw the Tamur. We were still about 1500 feet above it, yet even from our altitude the river looked white. Funny, I thought, all these years kayaking and this hasn't happened before: Never has a class three looked this white from this high up! The other item bothering me was that the valley seemed too steep to contain a runnable river.

As we dropped down I reckoned I'd at least see straight routes through the white, but the more we descended the frothier the river became. At Dhoban--and river level--I knew there had been a serious communication breakdown but I couldn't decide between a rusty german/english translation or if Pauline and I had mistakenly instructed our porters to take us to the wrong Dhoban.

At a teahouse we ordered dahl bat, and Pauline asked, "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing." I lied.

"You sure have become awfully quiet."

A plate full of steaming dahl but that challenged my lack of appetite quickly betrayed my apprehension. I wasn't alone though: Pauline's plate also went uneaten.

Still, we pretended nothing was wrong. Teg, Lockman and Dopasaan carried our gear and boats to the river's edge. They too felt our apprehension for after we had settled up with them, tipping them handsomely, they stuck around, hoping I'm sure for the opportunity to carry our boats back to Basantapur (which was what Pauline's permit was for anyway--mine as it turned out was for the Annapurna district). As we pulled into the current I'll always remember the communal look on our porters' faces: It must have been the same one friends and relatives wore as the Titanic pulled away from the wharf.

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As for the run, I'll say this: The Tamur is not, never was and never will be a class three. And it's especially not a class three the first day. Although the rating system has seriously eroded in the last few years, my personal ranking method, one that has never failed me, has not. It works on the simple principle of my legs going numb. In hard water, shoehorned into my boat, my legs are rendered into a pins and needles factory. Since my attention is elsewhere, the numbness is the least of

my worries and rarely does it register. In water less than class four my legs are stretched out and fully awake whereas my upper body often falls asleep, not unlike what happens to certain bus drivers. Rarely, in my boat on the Tamur were my legs awake. Fortunately, my legs' circulation was often restored by frequent scouting and an occasional portage. Not that the river ever rated over four plus, just that the consequences of screwing up and loosing a boat or paddle was painfully obvious.

Often I would look up at the ridge tops and think, "It'll be a far longer walk out of this valley than it ever was getting here." And coming to yet another substantial rapid I would begin praying to the various deities: "I promise I'll never *ever* complain about suicidal or somnambulist bus drivers again, just get me out of here alive!"

In time the gods answered my prayer--and they even saw to it that Pauline never missed a roll, all eight of them. She paddled like a battery-ad bunny and all she needed to affix to her programming was a little steerage and she wouldn't have dropped into the various holes and turbulence that I specifically told her to stay away from.

When we did at last reach the safety of the Sun Kosi we felt like survivors of a natural disaster--something I'm not so sure the Tamur doesn't mean.



At Chatra, the take-out, we were quickly mobbed by several surly drivers, who due to their cornered market were demanding an outrageous rate to take us and our gear the handful of kilometers to Dharan. It was a repeat episode of trying to get off the Sun Kosi eleven years before. I was thankful for Pauline's level-headed dealings with this local mafioso: an old man with rheumy eyes who looked like a toad, a skinny twerp who wore an oversized suit and purple glasses and who kept spitting beetle juice inches away from Pauline's feet and a dime-store thug who was yelling into her face. We were saved though by an ex-gurka who calmly stepped forward, pointed to a distant parked bus and politely informed us that if we waited until tomorrow we could get a ride to Kathmandu for cheaper than these highway robbers' ransom to Dharan. I was so relieved that when I bought our tickets, I failed to check our seat numbers.

Although Chatra is just a one-lane bazaar, there was plenty to do. We parked ourselves in the Hamro Hotel and Sun Kosi Raft Cold Centre, and sipped beer in the sanctuary of its small garden. Then I went for a shave.

Barber. Job description: must be able to steady straight edge razor on customer's throat while milling onlookers shake shack to richter rating of 7.0.

That evening we attended a carnival. There were rides and shows and all sorts of job opportunities, such as:

Ferris wheel operator. Job description: Must power ferris wheel by running around inside it. Either gender OK but must be able to think like a gerbil.

Magician's assistant. Job description: Must be able to capture runaway rabbits and pigeons and return to their respective hats. Ability to levitate also required. Must be able to temporarily part with head and be handy at removing troublesome ketchup stains from around costume collars.

There was a contortionist also and I even thought I might see our sleeping bus driver featured as a somnambulist--but if he was double-shifting on this new job he must have slept through his alarm for we sure didn't see him.

The best show however, was Michael Jackson--well not *the* Michael Jackson but a five-year-old imposter who was dressed to the nines. Dancing and lip-syncing to the real Michael's music this midget-Michael had all the moves plus one Michael lacked: shoving his too-large of sunglasses back up his nose every time he looked

down. If the little squirt had done an encore I would have been terminally ill from laughing.

The next day as our bus barrelled out of Chatra for Kathmandu, we sat reluctantly in our designated seats: shotgun.