

Yaks, Tiger Tracks and Elephant Backs in “Happy Holi” Land

An AbiTravelogue to India and Nepal – March 2008

Namaste -- I honor the spirit within you. (For additional meanings, see www.wikipedia.org/wiki/namaste)

I’m recently back from India and Nepal, lands that divulge their rich cultures, religions and environment conspicuously and ubiquitously. (Sorry for my slimy rhyming right at the beginning of this letter. Take it as heads-up to watch my words, and to expect informality.) In just an hour or two in either country, my senses were permeated with Asian history, art and iconography; Hindu and Buddhist practices; spicy curries; beeping horns; runaway garbage, poverty; and developing world architecture (or lack thereof) and traffic (makes the Washington Beltway look peaceful). These countries are unlike places I’ve been before.

The **motive for my trip** was an 11-day workshop in Nepal that I organized for the Natural Areas Association (a professional organization of conservation professionals and volunteers). Nine people signed up (8 of whom had traveled with me before). Since I had bought two round trip tickets with Delhi as the connecting airport, I decided to spend five days in India beforehand. (I don’t recommend taking that route, if you can avoid it. The minute you step off the plane, the signs advising of airport construction, say it all: “Until then, inconvenience is regretted.” I dare not ask when “then” might ever be..... The point is: expect inconveniences.) I was joined by one other NAA colleague, Ann.



In **India**, we spent our entire time in three of the country’s grossly (pun intended) urbanized cities. While I would have liked to visit some natural areas, we just didn’t have the time. Instead, we succumbed to evils of human overcrowding and poverty: traffic (each lane carries four or five vehicles abreast); noise (the backs of the trucks actually request that drivers use their horns, and they do!); garbage (plastic everywhere); people literally living in the dirt; air pollution (in spite of the fact that the auto rickshaws all now use natural gas)... You get the idea. There were rewards, though. In visiting the Golden Triangle – Delhi, Agra (home of the Taj Mahal) and Jaipur (the Red City), - I was positively impressed by the displays of inordinate wealth and artistry exemplified in centuries-old forts, tombs, temples and palaces, constructed mostly during the reigns of Mughal emperors from the early-mid 16th century to the mid 18th century. Marble inlay, mosaics, painted frescoes, stonework, Persian architecture, landscape design, stonework and sculpture are examples of the creative talent that prevailed during this golden age.



Enough said about my limited view of a huge and complex country. Let’s move on to **Nepal** now, where I was able to learn and appreciate significantly more about the culture, society and environment. This was in large part because we were treated like royalty (uh oh, maybe I’m not supposed to use that word anymore since the word royal – as in Royal Chitwan National Park, royal Bengal tiger, Royal Nepal Airways, etc. – has been expunged from the national vocabulary), with professional hosts and guides from the conservation and ecotourism worlds. First, **some geography**: the country is about 550 miles east to west and 125 miles north to south, and is sandwiched between India and Tibet/China. Second, it’s not all mountains. In fact, the altitude ranges from 220 feet in the southern Terai to 29,000 feet at the top of Sagarmatha (the local name for Mt. Everest) on the northern border with Tibet. Third, eight of the ten highest mountains in the world are in Nepal. (So, where are the other two?)

Now, on to **politics**, a very timely subject because just around the time that you're reading this, you'll also be seeing news about Nepal in your local paper. Hopefully, what you read will not include acts of violence, but instead will herald a move away from the 50 (or so) years of political instability, during which Nepal wavered between monarchy and democracy. April 10 is national election day, made obvious to us by the politicking we heard from trucks mounted with loudspeakers and the groups of marching campaigners carrying red and white flags indicating their party allegiances. Much is riding on the outcome, including the development of a new Constitution. There are eight major parties and who will win remains unknown. The Maoists, who until a couple of years ago were responsible for violence, extortion and other acts of terrorism, are now a legitimate party and have a good chance of triumphing over the Congress party, traditionally aligned with the monarchy. In any case, it looks like the age of royalty, and the scandals that went with it, are over. You thought elections in the U.S. were crazy, but I've heard that tens of thousands of national and international election monitors, including Jimmy Carter, will be deployed to ensure free and fair elections. And, this doesn't include the 130,000 police called in for the event.....



Religion: according to the census, Nepal is 81% Hindu and 11% Buddhist. Remarkably, peoples of all religions seem to get along well and there is much overlap between the traditions, gods and worship sites. I was struck by the predominance of religious imagery, structures and conspicuous practitioners. It seems that you go anywhere without seeing:

- Hindu temples, constructed mostly of wood with squared bases and numerous stories, each with its own roof. They are often ornamented with carvings, statues of gods, animals and mythical figures, and sometimes humans depicted in a variety of erotic positions (Kama sutra)
- Buddhist gompas (monasteries) and stupas (holy monuments that often contain remains of a Buddha or saint)
- icons of the pantheon of gods and their many manifestations, incarnations, vehicles and consorts. My Lonely Planet guide explains the differences between these concepts (see page 48 of the 2006 edition), but I remain mystified. It seems that the images and the stories that go with them are so varied and complex that you could easily write an entire PhD on the meaning of a single image of Shiva or Vishnu
- the color red (and its close allies orange and yellow) is a holy color and is ubiquitous – shrouding statues of Hanuman, the monkey god; on altars in temples and out on the street
- tikas, the red dots on the foreheads of people (men and women, alike) who have received blessings from the gods (yes, I sported several tikas during my time there)
- chants of “*Om mani padme om*” (Hail to the jewel in the lotus) that can be heard emanating from temples, homes and places of business
- numerous prayer wheels encircling Buddhist stupas or fronting monasteries
- fluttering (or sometimes tattered) prayer flags strung every which where. The five colors of the flags represent the five elements (air, water, fire, earth and space) and are inscribed with mantra, prayers and images



Nature and conservation: the focus of our trip and the best part! We visited two major protected areas: the Annapurna Conservation Area in the central Himalayas and Chitwan National Park in the lowlands

(terai), as well as a smaller national park just outside of Kathmandu. The latter, Shivapuri, is the source of water for the populated Kathmandu Valley and is known for its rich birdlife, and several monasteries and temples within its borders. Our half day hike took us to the Nagi Gompa where red-robed monks instructed us in the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism and we lit candles to place by the bowls of rice, flowers and water offered to the Buddha, vividly portrayed in five large, colorful paintings.

The **Annapurna** region is one of Nepal's most popular trekking areas, and of course we partook. We divided ourselves into two groups, and I (always one to want to go farther and higher...) decided to go on the longer, steeper Ghorepani - Poon Hill trek. My guidebook listed it as a six day trek, but we only had three days to do it. I also knew beforehand that the first day would be 11-12 miles, with a 5000 ft. elevation gain. But I said, "What the hell. I'm young" (maybe not young enough, however, to actually remember my age). Later, my knees reminded me that they're over 50 years old.... Yes, it was long and hard and steep with many ups and downs, mostly on stone steps that had been built by people from the many villages we walked through. But it was magnificent.

We hiked along glacial rivers; through oak, pine and rhododendron forests; up hills and down, and up again; across rivers (on suspension bridges); by waterfalls; through villages and farms, by young children singing and dancing, women weaving rugs, knitting caps, and collecting wild grass, and men herding goats and mules laden with sacks of grain; through tea houses full of European and Asian trekkers; and often within view of the snow-capped peaks of the Annapurna Range (with peaks from 21,000 feet to over 24,000 ft.). A word about the rhododendrons: Nepal is the center of rhododendron diversity, and these babies are not like the bushes we have in our yards. They're trees 50 feet or more tall. And, lucky for us, they were in bloom - with huge red and pink blossoms that our trusty porters kept picking and offering us. I decided that our young friends wanted us to be as beautiful as the Britney Spears photos on their t-shirts!



In spite of all the tourist traffic (which includes porters and guides), I was impressed at how clean and well maintained the trails were, and how friendly the local people are, considering that we were walking through their front yards. The reason for this, and for the conservation and well-being of the environment, the culture and communities – is the Annapurna Conservation Area Project. Now 20 years old, this project promotes natural area conservation, socio-economic development of the 100,000 or more residents of the area, and tourism management (over 45,000 trekkers/yr.). It engages residents in managing tourism, developing alternative energy, farming and livestock management, supporting women's projects (including handicrafts production), enhancing community infrastructure and preserving cultural heritage. As a result, while people live simply, they live well, and are thankful to tourists who, through entrance and user fees, support community development.

In and around **Chitwan National Park**, the integration of communities with conservation is similar. In fact, Nepal is unique in the world in its conservation policies and practices. In 11 of its 16 protected areas, tourism revenue is split 50-50 between the government, who owns and manages the parks, and the communities surrounding them. Buffer zones are declared around each area and a series of committees and user groups are established to implement community development programs, trainings, and income-generating activities. The villagers around Chitwan have established community forests which they manage for wildlife, harvestable grasses and tourism. It's quite commendable, especially because the concept of local people benefiting from conservation is oft-talked about but little realized. And, in this case, local people actually have excellent reasons for **not** wanting to protect nature: attacks by large animals (especially rhinos and tigers) kill or injure at least three people in the area every month. (The

Relief Fund for Wildlife Victims, which hosted our trip and to which we gave our ecotourist donation, is working to mitigate such conflicts between people and wildlife.)

So, on to our adventures there: upon arriving in Chitwan, we visited the Tharus, an indigenous people that were once the sole residents of the Terai because they had a natural immunity to malaria, which plagued the area until the advent of DDT. When we arrived, groups of them were dancing in the streets, celebrating Holi. Ah, I haven't told you yet about Holi, the festival of colors, which was also being celebrated in the highlands when we were there a few days earlier. The exact origin is unclear, but the customs and rituals are not. Around the full moon in February or March people spray their friends, family and strangers with colored water or – as in our case – smear colored powder on people's face and clothing. The tradition is linked to stories of the gods, as well as to the coming of spring, and if you want to learn more, I suggest you go to www.holifestival.org/history-of-holi.html. (How's that for dodging my role as educator??!!) In any case, we – as gullible tourists, of course – were hit hard by the Holi activists. On the last day of our highland trek, we emerged with faces wholly (yes, I do like puns.....) covered with red, and sometimes yellow, blue or green, powder. Onlookers laughed at us, but that enabled us to be able to bond with them in spite of the language barrier. "Happy Holi" replaced *Namaste* as the universal greeting.

I've digressed. Back to Chitwan and its wildlife. After all, you did want to hear about the elephants, tigers and boars – oh my! Right? Well, we rode atop elephants and bathed with them in the river – though I must add that I beat a hasty retreat when I saw the large pile of elephant poop floating in my direction..... And, we visited the government elephant breeding center and fed a one-month old (sooo cute), who was nearly as tall as my shoulder. As for tigers, we didn't actually see the rare Bengal tiger on our jeep safari in the park, but we did encounter fresh tracks. Our guide thinks they weren't more than 10 minutes old! We saw one-horned rhinos, and later learned the results of the national rhino count (conducted by national parks staff atop elephants): 408 in the park now, 36 more than two years ago. And, wild boars, bison (also know as guar), monkeys (rhesus and langur), peacocks (yes, they're native to Nepal and India), giant hornbill, bul bulls and a million other birds whose names I'd never heard before. But, first prize went to the dancing cobras. Emerging from the tall grass in front of us, we actually saw two upright cobras twisting and twirling around each other in a mating ritual. It was truly bewitching....



In honor of that image – of two animals dancing around each other in what we humans would call love – I will end my missive. It seems appropriate to stop with that sentiment in mind for several reasons: 1) in light of the warmth and hospitality I felt from the Nepali people; 2) with respect for the Dalai Lama, who is currently facing criticism regarding the Tibet-China struggles; and 3) with hopes that Nepal's upcoming elections and political future will be peaceful and loving. And, it is a sentiment I send to you, wherever you are.

Namaste,

Abi

