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Namaste

(A Guidebook for Travelers to Nepal)

A heartfelt Namaste to Thamel in Kathmandu, the hotel Nepalaya and everyone who happened to be with me in this fairy tale.

‘There’s no one who’s been to Nepal only once.’
A hippy saying

The visas for Nepal are issued in the Kathmandu airport. A fortnight visa costs 25 dollars, a month one is 40 and a three-month visa costs 100 dollars.

Alexi and I opt for the third one.

‘If we want a real breather from our home, let it be the third option,’ Alexi says.

‘Hey, stupid, you’re filling in the declaration in Georgian,’ I say.

The airport building smells exactly like the Soviet post-offices and is permeated with the 1960s atmosphere. Before you queue for a visa, you have to take a photo in the photo booth, or else you need to have brought a biometric one with you. We had them done in Tbilisi, so we didn’t need to get into the booth and freeze in front of the camera. Next, you have to fill in the declaration full of usual questions. They ask who you are, when you were born, where you are from, the reason of your arrival and others: What are you going to do? How long do you intend to stay? What do you do? How many times have you been here? After filling all these spaces, we join the queue, patiently waiting for our passports to be stamped. Instead, a strange-looking stamp is stuck to one of the pages. We are finished in half an hour. It is dusk outside. As we leave the airport building, a young man with blindingly white teeth ties yellow silk kerchiefs around our necks and leads us to his jalopy.

It takes only about twenty minutes to get the centre of Kathmandu. The suburbs present a depressing sight at this time of the day: heaps of stinking rubbish, an extremely unpleasant, specific smell, a multi-colored human eddy, bonfires here and there, dust in the air, soot-covered buildings and rows among rows of dirty shanties, bendy and about to collapse. It’s deafeningly noisy – constant tooting, shouts, roar of engines and generators. The

feeling is that we were tossed back into Georgia of the 1990s and made to drive along the Zestaponi-Kutaisi suburbs of those blackout days. Our first disheartening impressions start at that point.

‘Where are we, Klaus?’ Alexi asks me, unties the yellow kerchief and wipes his sweaty forehead. I sit with clenched teeth. Through the mini-bus window I look at the outskirts, which seem hopelessly out of time, and my heart aches more and more.

‘Didn’t we live just like this?’ I reply after a pause, as if self-justification has any sense so much later.

‘Who?’

‘We, in Georgia, in the sweet 90s.’

‘How did you find such a dump of a country?’ Alexi is angry, but his tone quickly changes. ‘Wait a sec! It’s not that bad, I think.’ His eyes sweep the changing surroundings.

The sight is very different. The inner, or the central part of Kathmandu can be diagnosed differently. However, the initial impression is so great that it doesn’t permit to easily forget it and change the mood for the better.

‘You’re safe for now, Zbiegniew,’ Alexi encourages me as our mini-bus drives into Thamel, Kathmandu’s touristy and the most popular part.

It is only fair to say from the start that an extremely strange aura enwraps Kathmandu: it scares you the moment you step down from the plane, then baffles you to the extent of bewilderment, then makes you dizzy and finally makes you fall in love with it, and that’s forever. It indeed is the weirdest experience because on your first arrival you think you’re in the city of Tskhinvali after shelling and you’re gripped with the most dejected emotions, have nightmares, but in the morning, together with the rising sun, everything greets you with different colours and light. The real Nepalese ‘movie’ and ‘circus’ begins right then and there.

When in Kathmandu, the medicine containing codeine won’t save you from coughing. You’ve got to give up smoking, at least for a day. Especially when you know very well it isn’t a cold that causes your cough – it’s the local super-dozes. Surprisingly, Opidol and similar pills are sold in practically every chemist’s as a wonderful remedy for colds and coughs. I suffered from both within my first two weeks there. In fact, Alexi and I went through the motions of smoking joints in the very first days. The initial ‘torture’ of the lungs was particularly exciting. We hadn’t roared with laughter so heartily since god knows when. Back home, in Tbilisi, it was impossible to laugh so loudly and freely. As a rule, one was immediately stopped: ‘Your ID, young man!’ ‘Step aside and show your veins!’ ‘Are you high, young man?’ ‘We have to take you to for a drug test, your urine will be checked in the clinic.’ We seemed to have given vent to all the suppressed laughter during those first laughing fits.

All this happened on the roof top of our hotel. Amply decorated with flowers, the top was a dining veranda. Then Mr. Sundar, the owner came up, bringing us raksi, the Nepalese

home-made alcoholic drink. Its smell reminded us of our mountainous spirit, but very weak in comparison, probably five or six degrees at most. One had to drink it in brim-filled glasses. As a result, we finished two two-litre bottles. Mr. Sundar didn't drink at all. He just raised his glass and poured long toasts at us. Finally, he ended with a toast to Georgia which he pronounced standing on a chair. Then he sang Om Mani Padme Hum. Of course the former he did in English with a heavy Nepalese accent, the latter made us think he had taken singing lessons in his childhood.

In reply, Alexi drew out a largish Georgian flag which he had brought along, just in case. After banging the floor with its staff, he presented Mr. Sundar with our national emblem. Accompanied by a thundering applause, our five-cross flag joined the other ten already hanging down from the veranda. Those of the UK, Japan, Mexico, Italy, France, Spain, the USA, Argentina, Brazil and Germany had already taken their residence along the rails ... Georgia became the eleventh in the row, leaving no room for other countries on the veranda.

We rejoiced like little kids. The night Kathmandu glowed around us. The most lit and highlighted surely was the Monkey Temple poised atop the hill near the city.

The legend has it that once there was a large lake in the valley where Kathmandu is now. Once saintly Vairocana came along, prayed passionately and predicted that sooner or later there was going to be a magnificent temple built there. The ardent prayer turned him into a lotus growing on a tiny land patch which rose from the depths of the lake.

Later, another saint, bodhisattva Manjushree created a gorge with the Bagmati River with his magic sword to allow the lake waters flow southwards, so that eventually they joined the holy Ganges. The valley drained of water and it transpired that the lotus was growing on top of the hill rising 77 meters above the rest of the valley. The place was called Swayambhu, or 'self-created' god, the god that created himself from nothing. At present, Swayambhunath is considered to be one of the biggest and holiest Buddhist pilgrimage complexes in the world. In order to reach the two-thousand year-old temple, one has to climb 365 steps. The Buddhist tradition claims that the Temple is built in an ideal location because the astral forces cross one another precisely there, which makes any prayer said there thirteen billion times stronger than elsewhere.

The Temple is guarded by an army of monkeys that roam the place freely. Monkeys are holy animals there, that's why the alternative name of the monastic complex is the Monkey Temple.

That night we made such monkeys out of ourselves that the next day we turned up at a Nepalese wedding party together with Mr. Sundar. With the best intentions, he called us at six in the morning. Our mobiles rang when miserable and exhausted, we had just fallen asleep after a crazy night.

'Is he nuts?' Alexi grumbled. 'He said get a taxi, phone me, pass the mobile to the driver and I'll tell him the address. Is it a wedding party or a hangover meal?'

'The latter, I think.'

'Do we know if his cousin is a girl or a boy?'

'Try Jackie Chan, Alex ... Yak yogurt would be just right ...'

'Forget it. Get your garb. He said to leave in twenty minutes.'

That's what we did. Beating army timing and with amazing enthusiasm, we slipped on the local sandals and flagged down the first car we saw in the street.

In Nepal every vehicle can be a taxi – starting from official taxis and ending with bicycles, with cycle rickshaws, mopeds, motorcycles and private cars in between. All you need is to wave and have some small notes in your pocket – the rest is the matter of maneuvering.

When the taxi driver heard we were going to a Nepalese wedding, he stepped down on the accelerator. He said we were in for an unforgettable experience. I poised my camera, Alexi a joint.

'Is our garb shit?' Alexi eyed his clothes.

'Isn't it worse to arrive without a present?' I asked in return.

Alexi showed me a sizeable joint and winked at me.

'This baby will knock out the bride and the groom and their parents.'

'Before we get there?'

The driver didn't turn down the offer to join in, mindfully avoiding the relaxed cows and bulls strolling in the streets.

The animal world, or the local fauna, holds a particular place in the Nepalese culture. For instance, the cow is considered to be sacred, ranking as one of the national animals. Until quite recently, the cow featured on the country's coat-of-arms along with the monal, an exquisite Himalayan pheasant. Often the cow is called 'gomat', which means 'luminous, full of radiance'. It is universally seen as 'a mother' because the locals believe it feeds people with its milk, just like any mother.

The Nepalese consider the cow to be the embodiment of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, love and prosperity. And it's not surprising that the people engaged in farming see the cow as a symbol of prosperity. They believe they are descendants of Kamdhenu, the mythical mother of all cows, and that the holy ancestor is capable of fulfilling any wish. The locals firmly believe the land fertility fully depends on a cow. Butter made from cow milk is mainly exported to India. Slaughter of cows is strictly forbidden, punishable with many years of imprisonment. Consequently, one cannot eat any dish with beef in it. On the other hand, cow milk is considered to be the purest and healthiest product of all. It is extremely expensive because the Nepalese have a firm faith that drinking it purifies the human body from all impurities. At the same time, milk and other dairy products of yaks and buffalos are

rather cheap and accessible to everyone. As opposed to cows, they are seen as ordinary animals, which means their meat and dairy products are widely used in the local cuisine.

As for bulls, which were Shiva's personal vehicles (the deity used to ride Nandi, the holy bull), they freely roam the noisy streets of Kathmandu, and entire Nepal for that matter, along with cows. The traffic avoids them with care and reverence, while greengrocers have the hardest time. In an attempt to shift the animals' attention elsewhere, they revert to words of prayer because raising one's hand to shoo them off (not to mention using a stick or a whip) is considered an unforgivable sin in Nepal.

In the old days, there was a vast field near Pashupatinath, the Hindu temple, with a large number of bulls grazing freely. The place was called 'the bull field' until it was decided to build the Tribhuvan International Airport there, which serves Kathmandu today. The authorities were obliged to relocate the peacefully grazing bulls, with great reverence of course, to other pastures in Nepal. They likewise allocated a special place called Gauchaur for the old animals, and the cows that stopped milking were also moved there. One can come across small stone figurines depicting bulls on these fields. One of them is in the Balaju valley, near Kathmandu. The legend has it that in those old days the stone statue used to produce earsplitting lowing sounds, thus predicting the onset of the rain season. The stone statue is still referred to as 'lowing because of the rain'.

A tall, huge marquee is erected in the garden for the wedding party. We find ourselves in the middle of a noisy to-do. At the start of the ceremony, the groom is presented with a song, with the wedding 'supervisor' chanting continuously in the background. A group of singing girls dressed in red sprinkle red flour and yellow flower petals over the groom's head, who is also dressed in red. With the downcast eyes, he awaits his bride with a smile on his face, surely singing in his heart. The bridegroom is led by a group of elderly women. She is wearing red and a transparent red veil covers her face. She might be singing too, but inwardly. Her head is bent low in obedience as she circles the golden armchair with her groom three times. Everyone is singing around us. The ceremony is rather long but finishes when the newly-weds are ushered into a room with more singing.

'No dances, Diego?' Alexi whispers in a sing-song voice.

'We can dance later, with Sundar on our veranda.'

'Let's teach him our Georgian ones, Klim ...'

A strange sight greets us as we walk into the marquee. There are two rows of plastic chairs, red and blue, facing each other. There is an empty space where one would expect tables. An array of local food is abundantly provided on the tables set aside.

'Wow, it's a smorgasbord, buddy,' Alexi says, takes a large plate and piles a tall pyramid of various food on it. Then he sits on one of the chairs.

'Red chairs are for women, dimwit,' I say and he springs up as if bitten by a snake. He lowers himself on a blue chair, but soon guesses it was a joke and threatens me with his fist.

No alcohol is provided at a Nepalese wedding party. Instead, there is plenty of water which is served in tall metal cups to go with the dishes.

'They must have pretty strong guts, these locals,' Alexi says contentedly. 'Shall we toast the red-socked doves, Arnold?' He discreetly draws a metal flask from his pocket. 'I can toast them with the water, but prefer to do it our way.'

'Go on and pass it to me,' I reply as I clear my plate.

'I wish them all the best with everyday Namaste...'

'Outstanding words. Remind me to jot them down in my pocket book.'

'Amen, Carlito.'

However, we forgot to ask Sundar whether the bride or the groom was his cousin, whether it was him or her.