

Tiger Balm Tales



...A father-daughter journey to thin air with the help of Tiger Balm

As Written By Sherry Ott for www.Ottsworld.com

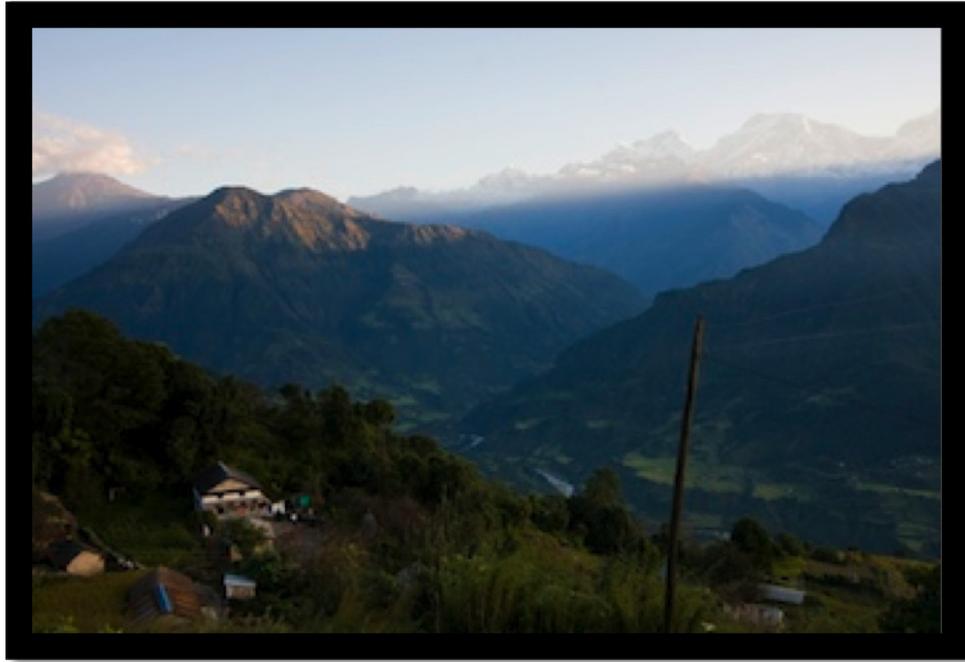
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Dedicated to my father, whom I honestly never thought would make it on this trip. His drive, perseverance, and sense of adventure made this possible. I'll never forget the moments we shared in Nepal.

Thanks dad for passing on your sense of adventure and quest to be different to me.





~1~

The Beginnings of a Nepal Trekking Plan

Why? Such a simple question, yet it resonated in my head many, many times on my most recent trip to Nepal.

Why was I going back to Nepal? Why did I ask my dad to come with me? Why did he decide to actually come with me?

At this point in my 26 day journey (pre-departure), I could really only answer the first two questions. I have to start by explaining one of the many weird quirks about myself – I HATE doing the same thing twice. Once I've done something or accomplished something or been somewhere, I don't have any desire to do it again. I guess I figure that the world is such a HUGE place that why go see something again when you can see a new place or experience a new restaurant, etc.

This quirk can be rather frustrating at times since I am often in mental struggles with my psyche that go something like “Why can’t you just be satisfied with standing still and staying put; doing things like everyone else?” Yet I’ve had to accept that this is who I am, take it or leave it. However this trip meant I was bucking the system, I was taking my precious travel time and going back to a country and area that I had already been to a year prior. But in some weird way, because I had never gone back to a visited place before, it meant that it was sort of a ‘new’ thing to do and I wanted to see how I felt about it. Yes – my mind is a bit twisted at times.

[My last trip to Nepal](#) one year ago was strictly about volunteering and not necessarily about traveling as a tourist. Volunteering in the tiny, remote village of Puma was one of the hardest things I had ever taken on, but I survived; and therefore I wanted to go back primarily to see how the people I had met and bonded with were doing. I had other reasons though too – after a year of [living in Vietnam](#), I wanted to see how it had changed me and going back to a challenging country seemed to be a good way to take the temperature of that change. Finally, I honestly wanted to trek. When I was there last time, I trekked from village to village not on any tourist trails. However I had always wanted to hike the Annapurna circuit so I felt like this was my chance to do so. I had made some key contacts on my last trip there who could help me arrange such a trekking trip. The brother of the family I lived with in Puma ran a [travel/trekking agency in Kathmandu](#) and I had stayed in contact with him for the last year. Giri was eager to arrange all of my trekking, in addition to my journey back to Puma to see his sister and mother. Oct/Nov is the best time of the year to trek in Nepal – so that scene was set; I had chosen a time and a person in Nepal that could help me get it all organized. The only thing missing was a travel companion.

For me this always tends to be the thing that I’m missing. I suppose if I would pick some ‘easier’ places to travel to besides Mongolia and Nepal I might have a better chance of friends coming with me. The problem is that ‘easy’ isn’t really part of my vocabulary. No friends were interested in the trip to Nepal (maybe they had read my blog posts from last year and the [leaches](#) scared them away?), so I next went searching for family that might like to come with me. My brother has no passport – cross him out. My mother thinks Singapore is ‘too scary’ – cross her out. My sister and brother-in-law would love to go trekking, but taking a month off of work and kids was impossible – cross them out. That left my father. He had already [traveled to China with me](#), he enjoyed going to foreign countries, he loved mountains and trekking (I’m assuming this fact since he used

to drag us kids on vacations in Wyoming camping all the time), and he – like me – was always looking for something new and unusual to do.

From an outsiders point of view, my dad is really quite adventurous in a quirky way. He and my mom once traveled from Seattle to New Zealand and back on a freighter. Plus, for the last 25 years he's been walking to/from US capital cities on an intricate path around the USA. This fact alone could be a whole separate story I may explore at some point! But for now, let's just say that he's a bit quirky...and apparently that's where I get my own quirkiness from. It took me 39 years to figure that out though.

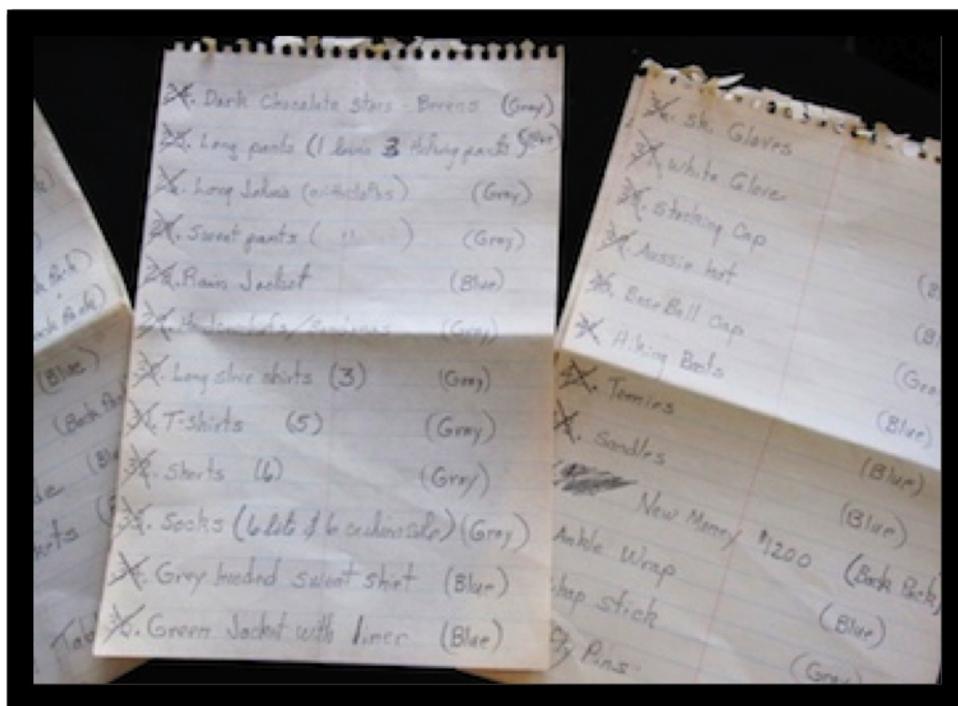
I asked my dad if he wanted to join me as I really thought that he, out of any of my family or friends would appreciate the simplicity of Nepal and the rural lifestyle of the villages. Plus, at 73 years old, I felt like it would be quite an opportunity to see the mountains of Nepal. After a lot of uncertainty and pressure from others in the family (the most coming from my mom) he decided to join me. Game on...

The Tiger Balm Tales is a series of stories which chronicle our father-daughter journey to Nepal for 26 days; the trekking, the people, the culture, the great heights (and some lows), and the excessive use of Tiger Balm.

After the whole trip was over my comment was,

“For the rest of my life, every time I smell Tiger Balm it will remind me of Nepal.”

I hope you enjoy the journey...



~2~

Preparing the Parents

“Dad, you NEED to get a hepatitis shot,” I instructed.

“Do I really? I’m strong, I should be ok,” he responded calmly.

“Dad, your strength has nothing to do with it – when you travel in a developing country you are at the mercy of that country. You can’t control who is preparing your food, and what they’ve been doing. You can’t control how clean or dirty you may be trekking or who you come into contact with. You can’t control anything – you are going to Nepal, not Paris. Spend the damn money and get the shot!”

This was one of our many pre-trip skype conversations that left me wondering what I had gotten myself into. What was I thinking – asking my 73 year old father who had never

traveled to a developing country (ok – he had one business trip to Ecuador years ago) to go to Nepal? Nepal is like India – it’s the ‘big leagues’ of developing country travel. I had asked him to skip the play offs and go right to the Super Bowl.

I spent the next skype conversation with him going through his packing list.

“How many pairs of socks should I take?” he’d ask.

“Dad, I have no idea....uh....how about 5 pairs.”

“5 – Ok. How many t-shirts?” ...

Yes, this conversation lasted about an hour. My dad is a retired engineer – logic and being precise was his job for 35 years – so this ultra precise list shouldn’t have surprised me I guess. I was annoyed and a bit tickled by this conversation at the same time. Annoyed that I was doing his packing for him; something I hate to do for myself! But I was tickled he had put this much prior thought into his list down to the exact number of pairs of underwear; 5 in case you were wondering.

Then there was my mother.

I had been sending my dad various blog posts about Nepal and trekking there in the hopes that it may help set some expectations as to the culture. This was probably done in vain since I don’t think it’s really possible to set expectations for Nepal and specifically Kathmandu. One of the blog posts had a bunch of information about the Annapurna trail and lots of pictures. I had a skype call from my mother early that morning from the US.

“Hello – you are up early mom.” I said.

“Yes, I just read your email and now I’m freaked out?” she replied.

“What? I don’t understand.” I answered.

“I’m freaked out! I knew that your father was going to be trekking, but when I saw those pictures and saw how big the mountains were NOW I’m freaked out! How’s he going to do that?! They are really high up and it looks really dangerous!” she said on the brink of breaking down.

“Well you didn’t think it was going to be flat like South Dakota did you? It’s Nepal mom, the world’s tallest mountains are there! Don’t worry, he’ll be fine, there will be a trail, we won’t be using ice picks or anything.”

This was said boldly, but truth be told – this was the beginning of my worrying. My worrying about what I had talked my dad into. I really had no idea if he’d make it or not. Hell, I didn’t know if I would be fit enough to make it! The highest pass we crossed was nearly 18,000 ft; higher than I had ever been before. So why did I think this was a good idea?

While I started worrying and fielding more questions from my worried mother, my dad was enjoying a bit of celebrity status in his small town of Milbank South Dakota. I informed him that he would need to bring some ‘emergency’ US dollars in case we had trouble using the ATM to take out Rupees. Based on all of my travel experience, I made sure he knew he had to bring relatively new currency; get it at the bank if possible so he could specifically ask for bills from the last 5 years. Developing countries are rather funny about things like this – I’ve lost many arguments with banks in remote African, South American, and Asian towns about the validity of my \$20 bill from 1993. When dad went to his local bank , they were intrigued with his request and even more intrigued with his travel plans. I would bet \$20 that most of them didn’t know where Nepal was – this isn’t a dig against their geographical knowledge – it’s just a fact. Everyone at the bank then started saving up new currency for him – a group effort for a few days. I’m quite positive it was the talk of the town.

At this point there was no looking back, we were prepared as we could ever be. My mom had been sedated by my reassurance, my father was vaccinated and precisely packed; we were ready to go. We met in Singapore and took off on our flight to Kathmandu, where our father-daughter adventure began!



~3~

Annapurna Itinerary

We saw the first glimpse of them from the plane window – the rigid, snowy Himalayan peaks. They were practically at eye level with our cruising altitude; you could reach out and touch them as if they were the pages of a book. They looked beautiful and scary at the same time. They were so cold, hard, and barren; as if they were saying “leave us alone, you don’t belong here.” Yet at the same time they were the fascinating peaks I had studied as a child, topped with snow that looked like an inviting dollop of Cool Whip.

It was a bit surreal; all of my planning was becoming a reality. As my dad excitedly peered out the window at the daunting peaks I asked him if he ever thought he’d see the Himalayas in his lifetime. He thought about it a bit and said “No. I don’t think I ever thought about it before. I’m sure I learned about Nepal as a kid, but I never thought

beyond that I suppose.” I’m pretty sure at his elementary school, which was a one room school house in the Nebraska countryside, no one ever thought they’d see the Himalayas. It was a marvelous feeling to know I was helping someone achieve goals they never knew existed; isn’t it wonderful when we push beyond our boundaries of possibility?

If I had been traveling solo as I normally do, I would have simply bought my flight ticket, arrived in Kathmandu, and then figured out the rest of the itinerary in a spontaneous manner. This lack of planning is the ‘badge’ of a backpacker – carefree, go where the wind takes you attitude that comes from a fat passport. However I wasn’t a typical backpacker this trip; I was a daughter traveling with her father, and I knew I couldn’t be that blasé; I needed a plan prior to arriving.

Thamel is the backpacker/tourist area of Kathmandu. It is loud, chaotic, dirty, and positively terrifying when you step off the plane from a cushy westernized country. There are plenty of people in Thamel who want to be your ‘friend’; it can often be a daunting experience as everyone tries to sell you some tour, gift, or drugs – you have no idea who to trust. However when I volunteered in Nepal a year ago, I was able to form relationships with some great people whom I trusted; Giri was one of them. He was the younger brother of my past volunteer host, Didi.

When I volunteered in the village of Puma, I stayed with Didi and her mother Ama. Whenever we had trouble communicating (which was often), Didi would get her cell phone and call her brother Giri and have him translate for us. That’s right – there was no indoor plumbing, and sporadic electricity – but there’s always a cell phone not more than a few feet away! The last time I was in Kathmandu I met my cell phone translator in person and we formed a friendship and kept in touch over the last year while I was in Vietnam. Giri runs a travel company in Thamel so he was perfect to arrange our trip for us.

I had been working with Giri for the past couple of months putting together transportation and lodging for my father and me, as well as to find us an experienced guide and porter. This is where I became rather high maintenance – finding a guide. I needed to make sure that we had someone with experience, knew about altitude sickness, was mature and responsible and most importantly – a guide who was willing to take a 73 yr old over the Thorong La Pass.

The afternoon we arrived in Thamel, we met our guide, Bishnu; he was a perfect fit. Mature, good English and many successful trips over the pass. Plus, he seemed to be social and have a really great sense of humor – something necessary if you are going to travel with someone for 21 days! Everything was set in motion and we'd be leaving the next morning for Lamjung district where the Annapurna circuit begins.

With the help of Giri and Bishnu, we laid out a loose trekking plan. For most people, the Annapurna circuit will take about 16 to 18 days to complete; we knew we weren't most people. None of us (including himself) were really sure how well dad would adapt to the hiking conditions, so we decided to not be in a hurry and practice the concept of slow travel. We'd take our time, enjoy the trek, and give ourselves 21 days to finish the circuit. Prior to this the longest trek I had ever been on was 8 days at Kilimanjaro – this was the big leagues.

We laid out the following loose itinerary which included approximately 5 to 8 hours of trekking a day depending on our speed, with altitude changes of about 1,000 to 3,000 feet a day.

- Day 1 – Kathmandu to Puma (the village where I volunteered last year)
- Day 2 – Puma to Bhahundada
- Day 3 – Bhahundada to Jagat
- Day 4 – Jagat to Dharapani
- Day 5 – Dharapani to Chame
- Day 6 – Chame to Pisang
- Day 7 – Pisang to Manang
- Day 8 – Manang rest/acclimization day
- Day 9 – Manang to Yak Kharka
- Day 10 – Yak Kharka to Phedi or High Camp
- Day 11 – High Camp to Muktinath (cross the pass at 5417 meters/17, 781 feet)
- Day 12 – Muktinath to Kagbeni
- Day 13 – Kagbeni to Marpha
- Day 14 – Marpha to Ghasa
- Day 15 – Ghasa to Tatopani
- Day 16 – Tatopani day of rest at Hot Springs
- Day 17 – Tatopani to Shikha
- Day 18 – Shikha to Gorepani

Day 19 – Gorepani to Tikhedunga

Day 20 – Tikhedunga to Birethandi

Day 21 – Birethandi to Pokhara

Oh my – this was going to be a long time roughing it! However, it was also going to be a long time enjoying some of the most spectacular scenery the world has to offer, the friendliest culture, and the fresh air; oh yeah – and a long time spending time with my dad.



~4~

Travel Back in Time

We said goodbye to the bustling city of Kathmandu and hopped in our time machine which took us back in time about 50 yrs. A time and place where electricity and plumbing were not guaranteed, where harvesting was done by hand, and transportation meant your own two feet. We had actually hired a car and driver to transport us plus our host, Giri, to Puma. No, not the shoe factory; Puma is the tiny village where I volunteered 1 year ago. I was going back to see old friends and students, to see how the village had evolved, and to truthfully see how much I had evolved.

When I volunteered in the little village of Puma prior, I was in complete and utter [culture shock](#). Yes, even a seasoned traveler like myself can still be jolted by going from New York City to remote mountain village; sleeping above the buffalo in a little barn with no

plumbing and sporadic light. However, after a whole year of [living in the undeveloped world in Asia](#), I felt like mentally I was much better prepared for this trip to Puma. However, this time my father was traveling with me and I had no idea what he would think of the simple little village. Granted, he grew up on a farm in the middle of Nebraska during the depression, so I figured that this trip to Puma would be a trip back in time for him.

As we drove to Besisahar we barely said a word to each other in the car. Simply looking out the window was all of the entertainment we needed. There were loads of people on top of buses, cows grazing in the middle of the highway, a random man sleeping in the shade on the highway (no joke), people selling huge bunches of bananas, and of course the many people working out in the fields during this harvest time. Even with all of this activity going on outside the window, it was a relatively quiet day for Nepal. It was a national holiday, Tihar (aka the Festival of Lights). Tihar is a 5 day festival where each day has a special meaning. This day was a day when groups of children go door to door and sing traditional songs in exchange for money or small gifts. Hmmm – sound familiar? Trick or Treat ...minus the costumes.

After eating our first taste of dhal bhat in Besisahar, it was time to do the hard part of the journey to Puma. No, we weren't doing the 3 hour hike up to Puma as I had done in the past; instead we were taking the Jeep. Giri , Bishnu (our guide), Deil (our porter), and my father and I shared a jeep with other random villagers and we took off up the steep, bumpy climb towards Puma.

This is when you start to question your definition of the word 'road'. To me, this dirt track littered with boulders and pot holes wasn't a road, to the Nepalese it absolutely was a road. As we rocked back and forth on the steep mountain 'road' teetering next to the edge, my dad looked at me and said, "people in America would pay lots of money to go on a ride like this if it were at an amusement park. Plus, this ride isn't short like a roller coaster, instead it's 1 hour long!" This was a great introduction for him into Nepal. This is where his views of the world started to change. Your idea of normal, good, bad, difficult are completely redefined. This is what I love about travel in developing countries – it pushes your mind's boundaries of 'normal'.

We arrived in Puma with a layer of dust over us and everything else in the Jeep. They dropped us off at the [school – where I taught](#); it looked the same. In fact, I was a overwhelmed with the feeling of I never left. It felt good to be back – really good. I was

aware immediately of my confidence in my surroundings— something I lacked when I was here prior. We took our bags down the familiar stone steps to Didi's house where she and Ama waited for us with a big smiles and flowers.

Quickly cups of chai were served with snacks. It was as if I had returned back to my home after being away at college; Didi had made all of my favorite things to eat! I surveyed the house; it looked the same – except...wait a minute...what's that? A new building attached to the house...a bathroom! Damn...that would have made my stay here last year easier!

The International NGO, [World Vision](#), had donated bathrooms to each house in Puma last year. While I was there the villagers were in the process of [building outhouses](#) on everyone's property. Didi already had one, but they went ahead and built a new one... bigger, better, with pseudo plumbing (a hose that ran from the spicket up the hill and down into the new bathroom). It was big, clean, and it had electricity – joy! No more bathing at the water spring with the villagers watching me as if I were a Broadway show.

That night we all sat around and ate Didi's delicious Dhal Bhat. My father was so enamored by the hospitality that he ate like the locals...with his hands. They all got a kick out of him trying to scoop up the dhal bhat with his fingers; everyone trying to give him advice. I loved to see him partake in this new culture – a sign of a wonderful traveler; I was proud of him!

The next morning I got up early and went walking around the village with my camera. It was just as I had remembered – within 10 minutes I had a stream of children following me watching my every move. My father, Giri, and I went to visit the school. When I left Puma last time I gave the school money to have bookshelves moved up via Jeep from Besisahar. They unlocked the library to show me the bookshelves; I shrieked in glee as I had forgotten about them until this moment. It made me so happy to see such a great looking library for the kids! We played around on the giant bamboo swing made special for the Tihar holiday and then returned to Didi's house for chai and my favorite donuts!

Back at Didi's there was a crowd of people milling about the porch. Many of the people I recognized as the town chair people and kids I had taught. I looked around at the people sitting and staring at us and realized that the town of Puma had all come to wish us farewell. This wasn't just an 'off the cuff' farewell, this was elaborate. They placed two chairs in the middle of the porch and everyone gathered around. They brought the

elder of the village who was 83 to come and give us blessings. I believe that by having the elder do it, it conveyed respect for my father who is 73.

They gave each of us tilaks (a mark made of sandalwood paste on the forehead as a blessing or mark of auspiciousness), and a khata (a white silk scarf signifying safe journeys), as well as a mala (a wreath/necklace of fresh flowers). They gave my father a traditional Nepalese hat and me a beautiful purple pashmina. As if this wasn't moving enough, each person and child came up and gave us more malas around our necks. The outpouring of blessings from the little village of 45 houses was overwhelming. I found myself wondering what we did to deserve this attention? The village's generosity, the hospitality of Didi and her family, and the uniqueness of this culture was pure and overwhelming. Yes...a few tears of happiness (the best kind) were shed.

I had been worried about returning to a place that I had been before. Though, I'm not really sure what I was so scared of. I was surprised by how good it felt to return back to a place. I've NEVER had a welcome/goodbye like this before, and was touched beyond words; even more so since my father was experiencing this with me. At that moment, I was proud to be a traveler. I look at myself as a messenger for Puma to the rest of the world; showing people how wonderful cultural exchange can be when you open yourself up to it. I know that my goodbyes that day were only temporary. Puma is my home in Nepal, and I will go back – again and again



~5~

Breathe Through Your Mouth

If blogs were scratch and sniff...you'd really be in trouble with this post. I found myself chanting the mantra, "Breathe through your mouth, not through your nose." – while completely naked.

Oh, sorry, I got ahead of myself; let me go back to the beginning.

This was really the beginning of our Annapurna Circuit trekking. After spending a fun, [memorable day in the little village of Puma](#), we put our packs on for the first time and actually started trekking. Since we had made a special visit to Puma, today we had to trek to meet back up with the official Annapurna trail. This meant we had to do some non-tourist trekking at first. What's non-tourist trekking? It's the paths that the locals take. We started a massive descent down from the hilltop village, down the uneven

steps. Step, after step, after step. I was taking in the beauty of the rice terraces and the diverse shades of green surrounding me and that's when it happened. My dad fell.

I was quite a ways behind him and I watched as Bishnu, and Deil, our guide and porter, rushed to help him get up. By the time I reached him, he was up and dusting himself off. We told him to sit down for a bit and relax. I looked at Bishnu and I could tell we were thinking the same thing; "what was I thinking taking a 73 year old on the trail?!" Dad rested and was fine, but for me, that's when things really got heavy. No, not my bag, but the stress that was weighing down upon my shoulders; the stress of responsibility for someone.

I'm single. I've always been single. I worry about no one but myself. Strangely, for the first time I thought – what if something happens and dad gets hurt; my family will kill me for talking him into this! As a single, independent traveler I revel in my freedom and lack of responsibility. If I do something dumb – I only have myself to blame. I don't have to worry about anyone else's feelings, wants, needs, health, or self esteem. Sure, it's not for everyone; some people like taking care of others; however, I don't. Actually I never really give my irresponsibility much thought, until I'm suddenly confronted with a responsibility – then it seems overwhelming to me.

After this first incident, I found myself watching my dad's every move, calculating if he was shifting his weight correctly, keeping his center of balance, was he resting enough, was he drinking enough, was he too close to the edge; it was relentless torture to my brain.

We finally made it down to the river where we would shortly meet up with the 'official' Annapurna circuit. My quads were shaking uncontrollably from all of the downhill we just finished. The stream didn't really have a good way across which forced us to take off our shoes and socks and walk over. Bishnu offered to carry my dad as we were both worried about him falling. But dad of course was too proud to do that, so he used his pole for balance and waded across. I watched nervously as I took off my shoes and socks. I looked down and saw my one last going away present from Puma; my sock was soaked in blood. Damn those [leaches!](#)

The cold water did feel good on my hot, swollen feet; and it was only noon. The rest of the day we spent going up and down and up and down through villages and across bridges. We met many locals along the way going about their daily chores. We tried our

best to stay in the shade as the sun seemed to be sucking the energy out of us with every step like a leach on my foot. We were walking on the flat in the sun when I looked over at my dad and observed him walking along slowly, like he was a steam engine losing steam up a hill...ready to roll backward.

We had been hiking for about 8 hours and the sun was going down fast. The trekking was going much slower than Bishnu or I had originally anticipated. We weren't near our final destination yet, but we both knew that we didn't want dad walking in the dark. Quite frankly, I didn't want to hike in the dark either; I was exhausted from the physical and mental exertion I was putting myself through! We were still about a 30 min. uphill climb to Bahundanda so we decided to simply stop at the next guesthouse we came across.

As we came into a small little spattering of houses, there were a few that offered lodging. I followed Bishnu upstairs to look at the rooms. Considering this was our first look at a guest house along the circuit, I didn't really know what to expect. The lodging resembled a loft in a barn. Small room, thin boards with gaps plugged up my newspaper wallpaper, small wooden beds, no plumbing, no electricity. Looks good to me...we'll take it!

After a sweaty day of hiking plus getting caught in a muddy rain storm, more than anything I wanted to get clean. Bishnu kindly organized a hot bucket of water for me to 'shower'. Although bucket showers are not ideal...I was used to them from my varied travels. I dug my headlamp, toiletry bag, and some clean, warm clothes out of my bag. I was told the only private place to shower off was in the outhouse...um...ok –sounds good. I made my way out to the outhouse and that's when it hit me...the smell of sewage. I peaked into the door and there was a steaming, small bucket of water inviting me in, but the smell of shit was keeping me out.

With no electricity, I had to shine my little headlamp around the small, damp outhouse. My beam of light burrowed thru the rising steam and into the corners looking for other creatures that may turn this into a 'group shower' for me. The outhouse was the size of a broom closet with a squat toilet, a water spicket, a small plastic empty bucket and now my little steaming bucket. There was a rusty old nail near the faucet and a small window to try to ventilate. The ventilation was futile as the odor rose from the ground and infused the little room as if someone was burning incense in the corner...yet this was no incense. I gingerly stepped inside and thought, how the hell am I going to do this? There was no where to hang my clean clothes, take off my dirty clothes, or to even set

my toiletry bag. But my vanity won out...I stepped in and started my mantra...breathe through your mouth, not through your nose.

I've been in lots of tough situations when it comes to travel, but showering in the cold, dark, sewage-smelling outhouse was one of the worst. I hung my headlamp, towel, and clean clothes on the faucet head, my dirty clothes on the nail, and I tried my best not to step in the squat toilet. Even though I was in theory getting clean, I wondered if the smell would seep into my skin and I would smell like shit for days.

I continued to try to breathe through my mouth with long deliberate breaths. I decided that my hot water seemed to make the smell worse...like boiling a pot of soup or something...as things heat up, so does the aroma. It was the longest feeling short bucket shower of my life! I quickly tried to dry off with my little shammy travel towel and put on enough clothes to go outside and finish dressing. I stepped outside and the cold air hit me and I took in a big whiff of fresh air trying to purge my senses of the past odors.

In the end, I was clean, and my dad made it through the first day of trekking; that was all that mattered. The first day of trekking was a success. Albeit a bit stressful and smelly – but still a success!



~6~

Road Work Ahead

What is it about growing older that changes us? Not only do our feet get bigger, but we tend to also develop more irrational fears. I've been aware of it for some time now; my growing fear of heights. As each year goes by I turn into Jimmy Stewart in *Vertigo*... I freeze, the world seems to spin around me, and I have to talk myself through the irrational panic. Why on earth did I think that going on a hiking trip in the Himalayas would be a good idea?

After hiking a day to get to the trail, we were now hiking on the main Annapurna trail. This tourist route had little villages peppered along the trail giving you an endless supply of drinks, fruit, food, people watching, and lodging. However the downside to hiking the trail was that it was like a super highway of tourists. On [day 1 we were surrounded by locals](#), and from here on out we would be surrounded by tourists. We chose to hike the trail at the best time of the year; the weather was perfect – no more monsoon, and not

freezing cold yet. Of course this was why everyone else also decided to come and hike the trail; Oct/Nov was high season.

As we took off and crested the hill from Bahundanda we dipped down into a stunning green valley of rice terraces. The green grass met the blue skys; the landscape seemed to explode. It didn't take long for groups of people and porters to start passing us. It was as if they were flashing their bright lights behind us kindly requesting us slow pokes to move over so they could pass. Instead of lights, they had walking polls – klink, klink, KLINK on the rocks as they came up behind us. As groups of people briskly walked by us I wondered...why? Why are they in such a hurry? We are in this beautiful scenery nestled among the Himalayas, and we traveled presumably long distances to get here, but I seldom saw many of these people look up from the trail. They just kept maintaining their pace, not noticing the environment around them. All so they could get to the next village and wait? Granted, maybe I'm a bit too slow, and I take too many pictures, but I prescribe to slow travel I guess; I want to soak it all in.

Every time we seemed to gain some elevation on the trail, we promptly turned around and lost it. Up and down, Up-Up and down, Up-Up-Up and down. We also ran into some trail issues – namely rock slides. The rock slides would force us to use alternate routes, often sending us way up a steep mountainside with loose rock or down to a bridge to cross over the river.

One of the bridges looked as if it were made of toothpicks and was put up a few hours before we arrived there. I watched others cross over the low bridge slowly; it looked easy enough. I waited my turn and gingerly took steps onto the bamboo poles which creaked and flexed with each step. All I could hear was the water rushing below me as I tried to balance on the 3 bamboo poles; rejoicing silently when I stepped on solid ground again.

If it wasn't rock slides slowing us up, it was road construction. Yes, they are sadly building a road on the Annapurna Circuit – a topic I will later discuss in detail. When I first read about the road being built, I was quite concerned about what it would do to the trail. However, once I got there and saw it in person, I realized that the road would progress slower than the US Universal Health Care legislation. You may wonder how they build a road in a 3rd world country, high up in the mountains through solid rock on a cliff face. Wonder no more: 5 men, a sledge hammer, and a shovel....yup...that won't be finished in my lifetime.

For now the road construction led to some entertaining photography and videos, but it also led to obstacles that sent my adrenaline through the roof. I stopped to get footage of this slow, laborious road project as my father and Bishnu went on ahead. They had long since grown tired of waiting for me and my camera. I got the footage, joked with the locals, and left with a smile; but when I rounded the corner the smile quickly disappeared and I was suddenly aware of my heart pounding in my chest.

The blasting for the birth of the road left rock slides and a narrow little loose dirt trail that danced along the edge of the cliff-face. I don't mind climbing, I don't mind descending, I don't mind carrying heavy packs. But I hate narrow trails near ledges that will send you plummeting to your death. This new trail was about 3 feet wide, yet it looked like 1 foot in my terrified mind. As I took a few steps, I felt as if I were hanging off the side of a mountain. I slowed down and took each step as if it were my first...and sorta my last.

My brain raced with thoughts of everything that could go wrong. For a moment I think I forgot how to walk. I tried to tune out the sound of the rushing river a 700 feet below me. I was acutely aware of the big pack on my back and how it could throw off my center of balance and leave me nowhere to step to recover. Time slowed down and I slowly took each step concentrating so hard I began to talk to myself.

With each year I add to my life this stupid fear of heights seems to get worse and worse. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that as we get older, our appendages keep growing while the rest of us shrinks – in my head I have clown size feet now! Clown size feet don't fit on narrow trails!

I was thrilled to catch up with my Dad and Bishnu a while later as we entered the village of Dharapani. I just wanted to make sure they had safely made it through that section of the trail. Needless to say, I think the only thing that would've made that narrow trail worse would've been to watch my father go on it; then I really would have been a basket case!



~7~

Porters of the Annapurna Circuit

Porters in Nepal don't use any fancy equipment to carry their large loads. You see them wearing hand me down clothing and shoes from trekkers past. Flipflops and shoes that don't fit; but it doesn't matter because everything is appreciated here. I bet Converse never designed their canvas sneakers to trek to 17,000 ft. in the Himalayas, but they should know that they are being utilized to do so!

In fact, their simplicity of the porter's gear is what amazes me; if you give them a backpack to carry, 99% of them wouldn't even consider wearing it on their shoulders. All of this high tech gear meant to protect us from back and shoulder pain are instead introduced to low-tech solutions – a basket and some rope. This is hard for those of us in the western world to understand; but the traditions are strong in Nepal; and so are these porters.

Men and women (and sometimes teenagers) do this thankless task of transporting

unimaginable things up and down mountains, on narrow trails, and through streams. There are no/few regulations and their salaries are minimal. They carry items that traditional Nepalese way, using their forehead and neck muscles, hunched over to put the weight on their back. They rest on the boulder 'benches' along the trail which are set up at just the right height to gently ease the load off their forehead without bending over.

As most people were busy taking photos of the scenery, I spent a few days just concentrating on the culture of the porters and taking pictures of them. They seemed surprised that I would come up to them and ask to take their picture while simply standing there; but they loved it. They often get attention as they walk by, but few stop to spend time with them.

[View the Porter photo documentary at my Global Photography site here.](#)





~8~

Changing Rhythms on the Annapurna Circuit

A routine is formed. Get up at 6:30AM. Pack up everything by 7:00AM. Eat breakfast. Begin to hike from 7:30AM to 4 or 5 PM. Unpack and change out of sweaty clothes. Choose dinner from the same menu as the night before (even though it's a different tea house in a different village). Have a big thermos of tea, put on all of the warm clothes I have with me and go to bed at 9PM. A simple and predictable life.

It's amazing how fast you can adapt when you have to. It only took about 4 days of hiking and we were in a predictable rhythm. Even though the days were predictable, I was still constantly torturing my psyche on trying to predict whether we'd make it to the pass or not. I would vacillate back and forth rapidly. Yes we can do it; No, we'll never make it. It was quite exhausting! In addition to worry about the altitude on the Thorong La pass, I was constantly worried about my father and his ability to complete this hike as well as his health and safety.

As routines formed, other things were in constant states of change. We were making our way to Manang (via Chame and Pisang), the rest spot on the 21 day trek up the mountains. As we gained bits of altitude, we lost oxygen. As the altitude changed, our bodies tried to adjust and adapt. The initial signs of thrusting our body's into this high altitude was beginning to show. My sleep was restless; tossing and turning in the night. This was accompanied by crazy, vivid dreams that would wake me up in a cold sweat; all symptoms of existing in a higher altitude. I wondered if I would ever have sound sleep again.

The environment was also ever changing. We had hiked through terraced rice fields to windy valleys and pine trees. We had started to enter the world of snow-capped peaks. If I closed my eyes and sucked in a big nose of air, I would be transported to the American Northeast – the smell of pine and the crisp fall air. The colors were exploding in reds, yellows, and burnt orange on the mountainsides. The comforting aroma of fires wafted throughout the villages.

The temperature was changing too. Every day I would begin with yet another layer on me. I tried to not use all of my clothes too early on as then I'd have nothing left to layer upon myself when it was really cold. Each night I would sleep with more clothing on. The tea house lodging never had any heat (and rarely had electricity!), so we were left with trying to stay warm by layering. By Day 6 I was sleeping in long underwear, a wool sweater, a wool hat, wool socks, and a scarf. All of this was tucked into a sleep sheet and a down sleeping bag. No wonder why my sleep wasn't very fitful – I was the size of the abominable snowman!

My muscles were also undergoing changes. They were screaming out in pain each night and morning thanks to overuse and under training. This is where the Tiger Balm came in. We'd get out our little container of Tiger Balm and put it in one of our pockets for about an hour so that the balm would warm up and be easy to spread on our sore muscles. Then my dad and I would take turns putting the balm on all of our aches and pains; and there were many. After a few days my whole sleeping bag smelled like Tiger Balm. We'd get in our little balm sleeping bag cocoons, put on our headlamps and read up on the next days trekking; trying to prepare ourselves mentally for what we had to accomplish next.

We also started reading up on AMS – Altitude Mountain Sickness. We were now over 9000 feet and this is when your body starts to say "What the hell are you doing? Retreat

to where I can breathe!” Since I’ve actually had severe altitude sickness before when I [failed to summit Kilimanjaro](#), I was extremely concerned about getting it again.

I do remember how horrible it was, and mostly I remember the feeling of not making your goal. I was going to do everything possible to make it over this pass this time, I didn’t want a little thing like lack of oxygen stopping me! However I couldn’t help but have all the memories of Kili come flooding back to me – the delirious sleep, the asthma-like breathing, the headaches, the puking – I didn’t want a repeat show.

At 9,000 feet our breath was heavy and slow already. Even though the hiking on was flat and relatively easy, my legs were tired, my bag seemed heavy, and blisters were forming on my heels. What should have been easy seemed hard. We took our time and tried to make lots of stops. I could tell my dad was as tired as I was. As we trekked towards Manang we had a long walk through a windy valley where we began to see the beautiful, high snowy peaks. These peaks were over 25,000 feet, but it didn’t seem like it since we were already around 10,000 feet! There’s something amazing about standing on solid ground and peering at peaks that are 25,000 ft; a moment I never want to forget.

As we walked through the valley we were exposed to daily life of the Nepalese. We came across many locals out doing harvesting carrying large bundles of hay for their animals. The basic rule was, if you could walk, then you could carry hay. I saw so many kids carrying huge haystacks on their backs. I used to think my dad was really mean for making my brother and I carry bushels of potatoes up the hill to our house; that seemed pretty lame at this point. We saw people cutting up lumber, thrashing millet, plowing fields; everyone was working hard on these cold fall days. As we neared Manag, yaks first started to appear as a fixture and so did the signs for yak cheese.

We had hit our rhythm – even though our environment was constantly changing. These were wonderful days of trekking.



~9~

On The 7th Day, We Rested

I woke up in Manang; I didn't have to roll up my sleeping bag, repack my backpack, tend to my blisters, or put on my dingy hiking clothes. No, this morning we rested. I lay in my bed listening to the heavy hiking boots on the wooden floor outside my door – clomping back and forth getting ready to depart. You could feel that nervous energy that exists in the mornings as people get ready to depart yet again; however this morning I dozed in and out of sleep feeling happy. I am still today.

Traditionally Manang, at aprox. 11,000 ft, is the resting spot for the Annapurna hikers. You don't necessarily rest here because you are tired, you rest here to let your body try to acclimate to the altitude; to slow down and let it try to adjust and fight off the ill effects of Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS).

The village of Manang was different than the other villages we had been through. It

was designed for rest. There were little shops showing movies at night, bakeries and coffee shops, laundry 'facilities' and tons of trekking supply shops. This was the last real 'livable' village before we reached Thorong La pass and descended into Muktinath; which would be 4 days from now.

Even though this was a rest day, as part of acclimation people were strongly encouraged to do a day hike. Trekkers were advised to hike up a few thousand feet and then come back down to sleep again in Manang thereby practicing the altitude acclimation theory of hike high, sleep low. We weighed out our hiking options and decided to do a hike up to see the glacier – a 1500 ft. climb. The best part about the day hike is that I didn't have to wear my backpack. I took my camera and felt light as a feather.

The climb to the glacier was tough as it was steeper than our normal trail and the air was thin, but it rewarded us with spectacular views of ice blue glacier lakes and golden valleys. When we reached the viewing area near the foot of the glacier, we sat and strategized our hiking plan with Bishnu for the next few days. We had already made it further than I thought we would considering our rough start on day 1 and 2, so we were pretty happy to even be at this point. My dad was feeling good and had greatly improved his trekking balance, speed, and confidence since the first few days. His only concern was the diminishing oxygen and the fear of altitude sickness as we tried to get to cross the pass at 17,770 ft.

Once back in Manang we picked up our laundered clothes and celebrated our progress with one of the Annapurna circuit's delicacies; cinnamon rolls. I have no idea how the cinnamon roll sensation started, but I was thankful that someone had brought fluffy bread with butter, sugar, and cinnamon to the Himalayas! From the village of Manang, all along the trail there would be places selling big cinnamon rolls –a complete guilt free snack for energetic long term trekkers. When else would I ever be able to eat a cinnamon roll a day – only when you are trekking day after day expending the energy to negate them. I felt like I had landed on another planet; one where calories were non-existent!

With our rest day coming to an end, Manang had one more surprise for us – nighttime entertainment. Word traveled around the village about a horse race, and the locals were starting to line up along the main drag, a long stretch of dirt 'road' sort of like a rectangular town square. You could hear the bells in the distance and soon a group of

local boys and men rode in on miniature horses and down the 'road'. The small horses decorated in bells and blankets with grown men riding them made the whole scene seem a bit cartoonish.

They paraded past and turned around at the end of the road. All of a sudden with no warning the riders took off at full speed down the road. The crowd roared, the bells clanged and Manang came alive. This back and forth racing kept going for about 40 minutes. It was Nepal's version of 1950's drag racing down main street. There were no real winners or losers; instead it seemed to be a series of small drag races back and forth. Sometimes the riders would be riding so wildly they'd lose control of the horses and they run off towards the crowd of onlookers. Yet we continued to watch in amazement.

I watched the horses as much as I watched the locals spectating; you could tell that this event, no matter how absurd it seemed to me, was well loved in the village. Occasionally a herd of goats would also parade down the road stopping the whole race for a bit until the locals shoo'd them off to safety. The whole crowd, locals and tourists, would erupt in laughter.

By resting in Manang, we also had a chance to socialize with other tourists; we bonded over beers, itineraries, blisters, fears, and the crazy horse race. This was the beginning of many trekking friendships for my father and me. My favorite thing about resting in Manang was the fact that we actually had a chance to sit, relax and take in the village and trekking culture that we had been passing by every day.

I fell asleep that night feeling a bit uneasy about what was to come, but thrilled with how far we had made it already!



~10~

Paralyzed on the Annapurna Circuit

What started as a slight headache the night before had manifested into my complete paralysis the next morning. My head was throbbing, but worse than that, my body had felt like it had gone through a medieval bone crusher in the middle of the night. Every movement I made ached and my body felt as if it were a punching bag. My sleep was restless so I was already lucid when our alarm went off to signify a new day of trekking towards the pass. I rolled over to look at my dad, and ironically I felt as if I were the one that was 73 years old.

A tidal wave of illness had hit me. Immediately I knew what this meant. I tried to put it

out of my mind...but the headache kept reminding me...this had to be altitude sickness. Having battled altitude sickness before, I knew the signs. A wave of anger swept over me – why me...again? I did everything right this time, we went very slowly, and I hydrated; why did this have to happen? My mind continued spiraling into the abyss of trekking failure. Yet my emotions were magnified as I had brought my father along this far; if anyone was supposed to struggle I expected it to be him. But he lay there slowly waking up and he seemed just fine. I was going to be the one to ruin it for us. I was going to be the reason we had to turn back.

During our 'rest day' yesterday we went to the free Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) talk provided at the little medical outpost which was manned by American volunteer doctors. We learned about all of the symptoms, and what can be done to ease them. However I was well aware of the symptoms based on my past experience and I also knew the only real cure – to descend. In the talk we also learned that I had another thing stacked against me; if you've had AMS before, you are more susceptible to getting it again. However on a brighter note we also learned that the older you are the less likely you are to get AMS. If you are over 50 years old, your brain actually starts to shrink and therefore has more room to expand in your skull as you go up in altitude; good news for dad.

As I lay in my bed with my head swimming in a sea of disappointment, I listened to everyone departing past my door with a sinking feeling. All of the new friends that I had made the days before stopped at our room door and said farewell to me as they took off trekking again. Everything was moving around me and I was standing still. Whereas the day before I loved standing still; today I didn't. This was unplanned. This would get us off our schedule. This could be the demise of our goal.

Some of our trekking friends loaned us a thermometer and dad came back to take my temperature. Of course the temperature was in Celsius therefore my dad, the retired engineer, had to try to figure out the conversion to Fahrenheit so that it made sense to us Americans! He jotted away with his pencil on his little notebook, multiply this, add that, carry the 2 and presto – my temperature was 101...shit.

Luckily, I happened to be sick in the only town that had a medical clinic. Somehow I mustered up enough energy to shuffle over to the clinic with my dad's help. We had decided I'd better see a doctor. I felt as if I could barely walk, my head spinning, feeling as heavy as a bowling ball. I was imagining my brain swelling due to the hitting the sides

of skull causing me this immense altitude headache. I handed over my \$35 USD to see a young doctor. I sat on the cot and told him my symptoms.

He took notes about the length and itinerary of our ascent, he took my temperature, looked in my ears, and listened to my lungs. He put down his clipboard and said, "I don't believe you have AMS. I think you've caught some virus and have a sinus infection."

What's that...did I hear him correctly...no AMS...hurray!

He proceeded to give me antibiotics, nasal spray, and Panadol and told me to go consider resting for a couple of days before going any further to see if the antibiotics would take hold. My dad and I shuffled back to my little guest room, I took all of the drugs, and promptly fell back asleep.

I dozed in and out of consciousness for the next 18 hours. My dad was left to play nurse, waking me up to give me medication, watching over me and putting tiger balm on my aching back. He continued to watch my temperature climb peaking at 103 F. I lay in my little sleeping bag cocoon barely poking out my head or opening my eyes.

When I did come to every so often, I would poke my head out and see my dad watching me. The tables had turned – I was the one that needed him. I thought back to my childhood, and could never remember a time when my dad had to take care of me. It was always my mom who brought me 7Up and soda crackers; watching over me. In my feverish haze I marveled at my Dad's ability to care for me. Once again I was reminded how happy I was that he had decided to come on this trip with me.

In addition to my dad watching over me, our guide and porter (Bishnu and Deihl) also took care-giving roles. They would bring me bowls of noodles trying to get me to eat food and they would refill my thermos of tea. Eating the noodles pretty much used up my energy reserves and I would fall back into my sleepy haze. I complained about how my body ached and Bishnu came back with another pad to put on top of my current sleeping pad trying to make it a bit more comfortable for me. After all, our guest room was pretty bare bones – a little wooden bed with a 3 inch thick mattress and my sleeping bag; not the most comfortable conditions to be sick in!

I could only hope that with the three of them caring for me, my bag of drugs, and more rest I'd be able to be back on the Annapurna trail again soon. Only time would tell.



~11~

No Room at the Inns

By some miracle I woke up on Day 9 with a small trace of a headache, aches, and pains of the day before. Apparently 24 hours of sleep and antibiotics were just what the doctor ordered. I woke up feeling about 80% well; a miracle considering my paralysis the day before.

Considering I was unable to get out of my bed the day before, let alone walk; we decided to revise our trekking schedule. While being sidelined in Manang we learned that this was the high time to trek the circuit; the circuit was at capacity and guest houses were filling up fast. This was bad news for people who were slow trekkers (us!) as we kept hearing more and more stories of people not being able to find rooms to sleep in. This 'Joseph and Mary' predicament left people sleeping slumber party style on

the dining room floors of inns. This was even more concerning since there were fewer and fewer inns to stay at as we moved closer upwards towards the pass. Prior to this, little villages dotted the trail and if you couldn't find lodging, you simply walked another 20 minutes to the next village. However after Manang there were no more villages, just clusters of guest houses spaced out about 3 hours apart.

We decided to try to circumvent the 'no room at the inn' situation by going a shorter distance and also trying to send Diehl, our porter, ahead to secure a room for us. We hiked up out of the valley of Manang, crossing into a landscape void of trees. Suddenly the mountainsides took on a bleak, cold look to them. No more pine trees, instead there was just bare, rocky mountains. The white peaks were getting closer and closer and the air thinner.

I moved slowly, but felt stronger as the day went on and the antibiotics worked their way through my body. We hiked for a short 2 hours and stopped at a small encampment, Gunsang, which was the home to 2 guest houses with amazing views. Most people don't stop in Gunsang since it's so close to Manang. However, by skipping Gunsang they missed one of the best guest house views on the circuit.

After dropping our bags in our guest room, I went out to the 'patio' tables, propped up my feet and simply took in the spectacular view letting the sun beat down on me. You could easily imagine how much closer you were to the sun; the rays were powerful and warming, yet I was surrounded by snow. Some people like beaches, but I'm not one of them. Give me this view and relaxing atmosphere any day...bliss.

Guest houses along the circuit are an exercise in simplicity; in many cases they are a small step up from a tent. For \$6 you can rent a room with two beds plus you must promise to eat your meals at their dining room. Typically the rooms had two little wooden beds with a pad on it, a questionable pillow, and if you were lucky you had a little wooden table to set some things on. Most of the beds and tables looked as if I had constructed them; just simple blocks of wood and some nails. Some of the guest houses were more sturdy than others. The worst ones were made of thin boards leaving the wind to whistle through the little room making it feel more like a refrigerator than a room to sleep in. The electricity was sporadic at best and normally consisted of one little light bulb sputtering out light trying to illuminate the room.

The sparse conditions didn't matter too much to us as we never really spent much

time in the room due to the cold temperatures. Instead each guest house had a dining area which normally contained some sort of stove where all the guests huddled around at night to soak up the warmth. This is also where most of the socializing took place. Guides and tourists would mingle and play cards, swap travel stories and drink Roxie. The closer we got to [Thorong La Pass](#) you could feel the tension in the air in the group dining rooms; people worried more and more about crossing the pass.

The bathrooms were normally a shared outhouse with a squat toilet, cement floor, a bucket to put water in, and sometimes a 'shower'. However before you get grandiose visions of shower heads and curtains...think again. A shower normally consisted of a faucet head situated about a foot above my head; you literally stood underneath a faucet. I normally found it easier to simply fill the bucket with water and take bucket showers. If you were lucky, you'd get some luke warm water to dispense from that faucet. The hottest water that would come out was still rather chilly in my standards thereby necessitating us to hone our abilities at taking very fast showers!

Our current guest house in Gunsang had no electricity, but it did have personality. In fact, this was the first guest house we stayed in which offered an 'en-suite' toilet. I was pretty excited about the prospect of not having to get up, put on my down coat and boots to go outside to the outhouse! When I entered our little guest room, sure enough we had our own little bathroom, but quickly my visions of a typical bathroom were dashed. In my excitement, I had allowed myself to forget that I was in Nepal, and therefore was dreaming of a toilet, sink and towels. However what greeted me was a simple outhouse (cement floor and squat toilet) attached to our room; a little less glamorous than my mind's picture. Regardless, it was next to our bed – and that was great.

In fact my highlight came the next morning when I woke up and was going through my morning ritual to get ready to hike. Instead of having to go outside and brush my teeth, I was able to go into our en-suite toilet in my pajamas to brush my teeth in privacy. However apparently I was a little too excited about this. When I put my toothpaste on my toothbrush and was trying to put the lid back on the paste, I lost my balance and dropped the toothpaste. I watched as it fell in slow motion, bounced on the porcelain of the squat toilet and then down the toilet into the abyss – kerplunk! “Shhhiiiiittttt” I yelled! My dad asked what happened. I popped my head out of our lovely en-suite bathroom and said, “I have some bad news...”

There would be no place to purchase toothpaste for the next 3 days. We would have to rely on gum. I wondered how long it would take the earth to break down a tube of toothpaste in the 'sewer' ...probably longer than my lifetime. Not very 'green of me' ...but it was an accident!

Regardless of the toothpaste mishap, this little guesthouse in Gunsang was my favorite along the whole trail. The family who ran the guesthouse during the trekking season had an abundance of smiles to offer and their diligence in keeping the place clean and inviting was inspiring. I was actually a bit sad to leave their hospitable environment, knowing that our future trekking and lodging was uncertain as we continued to climb.

One thing I knew for sure was our future held less warmth, and less oxygen; but we would keep trudging slowly upward.



~12~

A Mouse in My House

After 10 days of decreasing temperatures and increasing wind my body is rebelling. My lips have become as dry as the [Gobi Desert](#) , my nasal passages feel like hard booger craters have invaded it, and my hands are so dry they look like they belong to a 60 yr. old; the elements most definitely do have an effect on your body. We hiked slowly from Gunsang to Ledar today. We saw ice for the first time on the trail. We saw no trees. We breathed harder than we had the day before. Now we are holed up in the 1 of 3 guest houses in the encampment of Ledar waiting; waiting for our body to acclimate a little more.

During one of our trekking breaks today our guide, Bishnu, said “Ohhhhh, I’m smelling like a donkey! I can’t wait for a shower.” Not only did the donkey reference make me laugh, but it also made me realize that I’ve now been wearing the same pants for 10 days, the same shirt for 9 days, the same jog bra for 9 days, the same socks for 4 days; this is beyond donkey filth! On top of the filth, everything smells like Tiger Balm! However, it’s a part of trekking for 21 days. I do wonder at times if these clothes will ever be clean again, or should I burn them for warmth at high camp? I guess the good news is that everyone smells equally badly; like a **pack** of donkeys.

Even more troubling that my physical rebellion or my odor, is my mental rebellion. After 10 days I’m annoyed. The sunroom in our guesthouse is buzzing with various conversations I find hard to ignore. I don’t understand why trekkers only like to share bad stories about trekking; trekkers who have disappeared, ones who were robbed, ones who die from [AMS](#). This is seriously annoying conversation. Why isn’t anyone telling any good heartwarming stories – the ones about people making it? Or is it that people don’t ever make it...no...that’s just my mind playing stupid tricks on me – right?

All of this negative talk is making me feel ill.

However I also knew why I was annoyed and feeling crappy. Of all days, at all times – I got my period today. So not only was I exhausted, cold and sore – but I also had cramps. Timing is everything. Even though this is a subject that my dad and I had never discussed in my lifetime (my family rarely discusses anything personal), I decided what the hell, I’m an adult and we are trekking partners – so I mentioned to him that I wasn’t feeling well because I had my period. His reply, “Well, at least you’re not pregnant.”

Wait a minute...was this my dad? My dad making a very funny joke about a subject that we had never talked about before? I was in shock! I felt as if I had entered the Father Knows Best twilight zone. This is why I love traveling with my dad, I get these glimpses of him that I never had exposure to before. Previously I only had exposure to the ‘father figure’, not the man. These are the memories that will be burned in my brain.

Dad and I started studying our next 2 trekking days on our map; in 2 days we’ll be climbing higher than either of us ever have climbed before. As we looked at the calendar we realized that we’ll cross the pass on Oct. 30th. We both realized what that meant;

Oct. 30th was a special date to our family. My father's mother (my [Grandma Ott](#)) who just recently passed away last February at 97 years old, would have been 98 years old on Oct. 30th. We were going to cross the pass on her birthday. We didn't plan this – it just happened thanks to our slow speed and [my illness](#) ; but it was clearly meant to be.

That afternoon as I sat and tried to journal, trying not to listen to the horror stories around me. I looked over at my dad; he seemed just fine. In fact, he was great. He didn't seem worried or annoyed like me. Instead he seemed really happy. I started to think about how far we've come. In all of that distance, I never saw anyone near his age range attempting what he is attempting. I'm sure there's been plenty of people over 73 years old get over Thorang La Pass, but they are not my dad, and that's who I care about now.

We are a good father-daughter team. We lean on each other and provide encouragement when we need to. I realize this is the longest time we've ever spent together alone. In fact, this is the longest time he's been away from my mom since they've been married 50 years. Surprisingly this is all going really well. I think the best thing about growing older is that your relationship with your parents change from unequal to equal....and I suppose eventually that will change again. But I've decided that instead of being annoyed with everything, I'll enjoy this moment. Sure, I'll still worry about our ability to get over the pass as a team. But I will appreciate every possible moment of this teamwork.

Our teamwork was never appreciated more than that night when we went back to our cold, dark room to sleep. I entered the room with my headlamp providing a narrow beam of light cutting thru the darkness. I went to put my journal on my bed and that's when I saw it – two beady eyes staring back at me. A little mouse was scurrying around on my bed as if it were his. I scared the shit out of it; it scared the shit out of me. Amazingly I turned around to my dad who was closing the door to the room and said in a stifled, yet startled tone, "There's a mouse on my bed." With precision teamwork and two headlamps we were able to chase the outnumbered mouse off my bed and out the door. I slammed the door shut...whew.

Yet in reality I knew the mouse on my bed had scarred me mentally; this would be a worse than usual night of sleep at altitude. After all, it didn't take me long to realize that

the mouse got in our room when the door was shut; we were in *its* house. I pulled my sleeping bag string tighter so that only my eyes could peer out; attempting to shut out any entrance for the pesky mouse. One good thing about my excessive worrying about the mouse was that I was no longer worrying about crossing the pass!



~13~

Beware of Falling Rocks

All I heard was Bishnu yell “Runnnnn!” My heart raced and I felt as if I were moving in s-l-o-w m-o-t-i-o-n. I sort of knew why I was running, but the gravity of the situation was fuzzy to me; it felt as if my mind were working in slow motion too. Over the last 11 days of trekking there were many things that scared me; the narrow trails, [smelly outhouses](#), [falling ill](#), and a [mouse on my bed](#). However this was the first time when my heart ended up in my throat.

Today’s trekking would prove to be the hardest yet. This was to be our last push to get to high camp at 15,100 ft. We took off early from Ledar in the cold. The sun was up, but the trail was still covered in shade; I could see my puffs of breath making me feel even

colder. As I walked and tried to keep my hands warm by switching my trekking pole from hand to hand trying to warm my free hand in my pocket. I fantasized about the sunlight shining onto the mountainside. Finally, my fantasy turned to reality and the trail was lit up with a golden glow; I could feel the warmth radiate into me.

The distance we had to cover today was short, but it would take a while due to the elevation climb and the lack of oxygen slowing us down. We knew we had a few hours of hiking before we arrived at Thorung Phedi (14,600 ft). The day would culminate in one last big push up a steep section of switchbacks, finally reaching High Camp where we would stay for the night.

Most of the morning we were hiking along a gradual incline perched along the side of the mountain. We were in a rocky terrain. There was no grass, no trees – just rocks of all sizes. It created this patchwork looking landscape in all shades of beige highlighted by a bright blue sky. From a photography standpoint, I couldn't have had a better day to shoot.

Since the air was thin, we walked at a snail's pace; but then again, so did everyone at this point. This is how I found myself following a group of 3 Polish women. Following them provided me a mental distraction. I just focused on their cadence and became fixated on the shoes hitting the ground in front of me. At this altitude and physical strain, your mind isn't really all there, so simplifying it necessary. In my trance like state, I concentrated on matching them step for step. My dad was a few meters behind me, and Bishnu was behind him. This part of the path was only wide enough to support single file trekking, so we all marched on slowly as if we were marching to war; young soldiers not really sure why they were on this mission, but going along with the rest of the unit.

I remember noticing a sign that said "Rockslide Area", but I paid no real attention to it. Hell, there were rocks all over, I kind of scoffed at the sign for stating the obvious. Shortly after this I heard a strange noise, but my oxygen-deprived brain was having trouble placing the sound. It sounded familiar like I should recognize the sound, but for some reason I couldn't really think it through, so I kept walking.

That's when I heard Bishnu yell "Runnnnnn!". His scream jolted me out of my trance and as I saw the women in front of me start running, so I did too. This all happened very quickly, yet it felt like I was having an out of body experience watching it all in slow motion from a distance. My mind finally kicked in and all of the puzzle pieces finally fit

together. The sound combined with the “Run” command from Bishnu meant there was a rock slide – Holy Shit.

My heart rate flew into overdrive and in my confused terror without turning around, I instinctively yelled back to Bishnu “Get Dad!” I could hear him in the distance behind me, but I knew he wasn’t close to me. The trail was narrow and there was nowhere to go but forward or backward. We ran along the trail until we could get to a safe spot without loose rocks rolling down the mountainside. We all stood there huffing and puffing in shock. Dad was ok, Bishnu was ok, the women ahead of me were ok. We were all fine, but we had a huge scare. Apparently some loose rocks a few feet wide were rolling down the hillside – if one hit you, game over. Of course, once one rock falls, you never really know how many more it will trigger. We were lucky that day, there were just a few loose ones. However we were all reminded this was not a Disneyworld ride, this was the real thing.

We stopped at the encampment of Thorung Phedi to compose ourselves with some hot tea and a cinnamon roll. Our day was far from over. We took a deep breath and began the steep switchback climb. It looked and felt as if we were walking to the heavens. We took lots of breaks and took our time trying to enjoy the moment as we caught our breath.

On our way up, we met a certifiably insane French mountain biker riding down the steep switchback trail. He stopped and talked to us for a bit asking us how much further to Phedi. We learned he had actually mountain biked up the other side and over the pass today, and was now on his way down.

These switchbacks were scary enough simply hiking, but on a mountain bike that was insane. Oh yeah – did I mention that he wasn’t even wearing a helmet? To top it off he was ill and had mild AMS which is why he was trying to rapidly descend. I couldn’t even watch him as he took off down the switchbacks further, it terrified me.

Finally, the switchbacks straightened out and we were walking up an incline between two peaks. There we could see the one little guest house at High Camp – we had made it to our destination – finally. The excitement of completing the switchback climb, which some say is the hardest part of the Annapurna circuit, filled us with elation.

I was relieved to be finished hiking for the day, so I took my camera and walked around

camp taking a bunch of photos with the brilliant blue backdrop. However, my elation was short lived. I met my dad in the dining hall for a late lunch, and that's when my mind started to wander into tomorrow. I wished that I could better control my thoughts as they seemed to spiral out of control; mainly into images of my dad or me taking a wrong step and sliding down the mountain. I had vivid images of exactly what could go wrong tomorrow.

To try to control the spiral I took the 'medicine' that I always take...I journaled. My nerves and emotions come out through the pen and land on the paper; a purge of my fears.

The rest of the day we spent in the dining hall with other equally nervous trekkers. I could tell my Dad was nervous, but he covered it well. He socialized with everyone and was generally the life of the party in the dining hall. I watched as he entertained people telling stories; the 'audience' was laughing as was he. This is a side of my dad I rarely see – a side which only comes out when I travel with him. I felt lucky because I knew my brother and sister don't see this side of him as I do.

He was not just my dad, but he seemed to play everyone's father figure. The 3 Polish women we were following during the rock slide hung out with us in the dining hall. One of them was quite sick from AMS and Dad made it his personal mission to worry about her.

In fact, all of our new trekking friends, as well as our guide Bishnu, bonded together and provided our first aide kits, advice, and well wishes for her as she went to bed that night and. All of us were worried about her.

That night we filled two water bottles full of boiling water to put in our sleeping bag in order to stay warm. This would be the coldest night by far and of course there was no heat in our room. We put on multiple sleeping layers and set our alarm for 5AM. I laid down knowing my sleep would be restless and angst-filled; however like it or not, 5AM would arrive. At 17,770 ft, [Thorung La](#) would be there, the question was, would we be there?



~14~

The Longest Day

KLOMP, KLOMP, KLOMP The sounds of hiking boots on wooden floor echoed outside my door. I poked my nose out of my warm sleeping bag cocoon, breathed in the cold air, and let it out only to see my hot breath evaporate into the darkness.

I'm aware those footsteps are a 'wake-up' call to begin this worrisome day, but I know the footsteps aren't for me; they are for my neighbor. I tried to put my head beneath the sleeping bag again like a turtle reverting back into his shell. I didn't want to think about

the coming day; I just wanted to sleep another 20 minutes. Soon my watch alarm went off beckoning us to stand upright and face our challenge. However the reality was we were both already awake thinking and wondering about what lie ahead for us.

We started at 5:30AM in the complete darkness. I was wearing nearly every piece of clothing I had been carrying for the last 12 days. Well-outfitted Europeans breezed by us in their down jackets and other technical gear covering them from head to toe; they were a walking Northface billboard. On the other end of the spectrum, my dad and I looked like we had raided a garage sale with a hodge-podge of winter type trekking gear. Honestly, we were poorly prepared when it came to technical, winter clothing. I had just spent the last year [living at the equator in Vietnam](#), I didn't even own a coat, so I had to borrow one. We operated under the idea that as long as we kept moving we would stay warm.

Our little headlamps cut through the darkness giving you the effect of being in a tunnel. It was un-nerving to not be able to see more than a 5 ft. radius of your surroundings. The sun slowly rose in the sky, so close to us I felt I could reach out and touch it. I let the radiating rays hit my body and give me energy. Everything around us seemed to be happening in slow motion, our breathing, our steps, the people moving around us, yet there was a palpable energy in the air propelling us forward.

The march to the top was a surreal experience taking us 4 hours to go from 15,100 ft to the 17,770 ft [Thorung La Pass](#). The 4 hours seemed to be a roller coaster of emotions not to mention a roller coaster of nausea. Trekking in high altitude slows down your pace, and turns your insides as well as your brain into jelly. It's like some drug induced high; memories and thoughts seemed to float through my brain in slow motion getting stuck for a while and rattling around. Until you actually experience this yourself, you can't imagine how each step seems to take such an effort that it leaves you breathless. My normal healthy self had eroded away into heavy breathing and legs that felt like they were 60 pounds each.

The sound of silence on the path was eerie; sounds of breathing, and snow crunching below our feet were the only thing I could hear. I don't even think we talked among ourselves except to ask the occasional question "How are you doing?" My dad was breathing heavy and going slow, but his spirits were high. Bishnu was our eternal cheerleader, greeting us with a smile and encouragement at every rest break; and there were many rest breaks. One thing that fueled us was the local Nepalese who sat

perched with their donkeys at the steep switchbacks, waiting for us to give up and use 4 legs instead of 2; I imagined them to be vultures. It was cruel punishment. However, one thing that holds true for my family – we don't give up.

As any great challenge is achieved, great emotions tend to go along with it. As we neared the pass I turned around and watched my dad come around the last bend. My whole body tensed up, my throat closed, my brow furrowed, and I could feel the tears well up in my eyes. I was overcome with pride and love as I watched him realize that he was at the top. I clumsily tried to video the moment but tears stung my eyes and my narration was wobbly at best as I swallowed my words.

I was relieved that we both had made it up safely and I was happy that we had met the challenge together. As I watched him walk toward me I wondered what I would be doing when I was 73. What adventures would I have, and who in the world would be with me?

Even my dad was overcome with emotions; something I rarely get a glimpse of. In fact, I don't know if I can ever remember a time when I saw him emotional. Angry – yes; tears of emotions – no. He talked about his mom watching him from above on this day, her birthday. She would've thought he was crazy for doing this, and she would have been really mad at me for talking him into it!

Bishnu and Diehl (our porter) smoked a celebratory cigarette. We took pictures by the summit sign and reveled in our massive accomplishment. That feeling of being on a high of utter happiness is one of the best feelings in the world. The sun was shining, the sky was blue, we were at 17,770 ft. and we were ecstatic. In my dad's elation, he gathered us (Bishnu, Diehl, and myself) all around and told us he had a question that we had to answer honestly – no bullshit. We all agreed to the terms. He got very serious and asked , “On the first day of our trekking, did you think I would make it here to the pass?” We all broke out in laughter and answered a resounding “NO!” . That's the honest to God truth. After the first few days Bishnu and I sat down and starting making plan B...we didn't think dad would be able to make it. I never told my dad this. But in the end he proved us all wrong, which made him glow with pride.

As we soaked in our accomplishment, little did we know what lie ahead of us. Unfortunately it turned out to be an icy downward slope which would prove to take our elation, chew it up, and spit it out down the other side of the snow covered pass. We next had to go from 17,700 ft. to 12,335 ft at the next town of Muktinath. We sent Deihl

ahead so that he could get to Muktinath and secure a room as we knew we'd have a slow descent.

I looked over the other side of the pass and saw a white expanse of rock and snow. Upon closer look the snow was really a sheet of ice. I decided to embrace the wide open space, avoiding the well traveled/icy trail and go 'off-road'. I picked my own trail through the deep crunchy snow imagining my heavy hiking boots were light, wide snow shoes. At times I could walk on top of the snow and sometimes I would sink in to my upper calf. I generally ran wildly down the mountain side (think Sound of Music in the snow). My dad however didn't like the uncertainty of my route. Instead he took the slow, slippery route where hundreds before him had gone a few hours earlier leaving a snow packed ice slide.

Needless to say he fell more than once or twice, but he persevered at a turtle pace; and I could feel his nerves with every step. This set my worrying mind in motion again. Visions of broken hips and ankles dominated my thoughts so much so that I could no longer watch him tediously choose his icy route. So I point myself downhill and tried not to think about him as I knew Bishnu was there to watch him and worry for me.

After a few hours we got through the icy snow path and a steep descent down another mountain lie ahead of us. It felt never ending. While most younger, braver people quickly went down the mountain, Dad and I slowly and cautiously made our way down. The good news is that we made some really great friends along the way. We had already been hiking for 8 hours when we met Roman, a tall solo hiker. He was a breath of fresh air since we were all tired of each other by that time; the excitement of someone new to talk to gave us new energy!

However, my dad was slowly deteriorating. The pounding downhill, the stress of the day, the hours on our feet, and little to no food had all taken its toll. First it was his back, then his feet. After 11 hours of hiking he was walking like he was a 73 year old; limping a bit, a pained look in his face with each slow step. We were still far above our destination of Muktinath. The sun was quickly going down and the moon was already up. We had to end the day as we started 11 hours earlier; with headlamps.

I felt like we were barely moving at times, and it pained me to see my dad struggling so much. The sun was down when Deihl came out on the trail looking for us. He had arrived in Muktinath 4 hours earlier and booked our room expecting us to arrive hours

before this. He was worried that we hadn't arrived yet and had come out looking for us; a touching act for a porter to do. He was so happy when he found us limping down the mountain in one piece.

That's when the most memorable part of this trip happened for me. Diehl and Bishnu each took Dad's arms and placed them around their shoulders and helped my dad 'walk' the last 40 minutes into town navigating down yet more steps by headlamp. I walked on the side trying to illuminate the way with my headlamp and giving encouragement. But in my mind was this feeling of pride, sadness, and gratitude equally vying for my attention. I was sad that my dad couldn't walk into town on his own two feet, but so immensely proud of his 13 hour accomplishment today.

Bishnu and Diehl helped dad make it to the guesthouse. We arrived in the 'lobby/dining hall' and the 3 Polish women who we had befriended the day before were there eating their dinner and celebrating. When they saw us they let out a gasp and as they saw my dad being helped in, they actually stood up and clapped for us. I love the camaraderie on this trail. This was the welcome we needed; smiles beamed on our faces. We were done for the day, and we survived.

Diehl had reserved us a room with a hot ensuite shower – heaven. I quickly gave dad some Alieve and set up a hot (ok – warm) shower for him. Even though we were both starving, exhaustion set in and we barely ate or celebrated at all at the guesthouse. We would save that for tomorrow.

For the first time in 2 weeks we slept without the cloud of anxiety over us. We had successfully made it over the pass. The next day when we woke up and I started getting up to go to breakfast, Dad sat up slowly and said "What adventure are we going to do next?"

I just laughed. I loved his quest for adventure. I answered, "I don't know – maybe Antarctica?" He laid back down apparently happy with my answer.



~15~

Motorized Travel

It was as if a huge weight had been lifted from our brains. For the first time since we started hiking the Annapurna circuit – I was free of worry and it was a beautiful feeling. It's amazing how much anxiety the Thorung La pass can cause internally and how it's gone as if a magician waved his wand and made it disappear into thin air as the audience in my brain gasped in amazement. We had the hard part behind us, now we could simply enjoy our remaining 7 days on the trail.

After an exhausting day of [hiking the pass the previous day](#), I woke up practically giddy without a worry in the world. Miraculously we both felt pretty good mentally AND physically. Our bodies weren't sore thanks to all of that Tiger Balm! I took a hot shower,

and washed my hair. Plus, three days after I had [dropped our only tube of toothpaste down the toilet](#), I was finally able to purchase toothpaste in Muktinath; yeah for clean teeth!

However, there was one important task we would have to do today – reorganize our itinerary. Since it had taken us more days than expected to get over the pass due to sickness, we now had to reorganize the 2nd half of our hike to get all the way to Pokhara in 7 days without killing ourselves.

Over a hearty breakfast of fried eggs, toast, and bacon we spread out our maps on the wobbly table, consulted our hiking guide book, and discussed a new itinerary with Bishnu. We needed to make up at least two days somehow on our schedule. The one thing that would make this possible was a motor. Unlike the previous sections we had just hiked, on this side of the pass there were some roads and jeeps carried tourists and supplies from village to village. I had a lot of mixed feelings on this intrusion of motorized vehicles on the circuit – but for the time being, I was happy to have the option of 4 wheels.

We decided that instead of hiking, we would take it easy and take a jeep to Jomsom thereby making up one of the days we had lost. Bishnu went to the Jeep stand and helped us purchase out ‘tourist tickets’. To ride the jeep to Jomsom it costs tourists 500 rupees (6.75USD) and it cost locals 150 rupees. However the Jeep doesn’t really operate on a schedule, it leaves when it has enough people to fill it; hard core supply and demand at work. So we went and waited...and waited...and waited. Eventually enough locals came by and filled the Jeep. Dad and I were the only tourists and they kindly took one look at my dad and put us in the front seat; a version of business class I suppose.

We started the bumpy ride down the mountain-side jarred back and forth but happy that for once we were off our feet. Dad and I were still in our post Thorung La pass delight – chatting about all kind of things. The terrain had made another massive change again into a wide, flat, rock-filled valley that looked like hell to walk through. The Jeep sped by other hikers sending dust flying and hikers trying to cover their faces as they continued their march through the rock valley. This just solidified our happiness about our decision to drive today!

Jomson is one of the largest towns on the circuit. A regular metropolis...it has an [airport](#).

In fact, most people fly into Jomsom and then do short treks on the Annapurna circuit from there if they have limited time. However, after coming over the pass, it was evident that thanks to the airport and the development of roads, this side was much more touristed; I didn't like it. Sure, it was nice to have some semblance of civilization, but the remote feeling was gone.

We took advantage of modern conveniences and sent emails back home to family letting them know we survived which would allow my mother to breathe again. We went to coffee shops and ate cinnamon rolls, we took our time and strolled down the 'street' in the new part of town (aka – touristville). We watched planes take off and land behind our guesthouse as the runway was right in the middle of town. A perfect afternoon of rest.

We even ran into old friends. People we had hiked with on the other side of the pass were in Jomsom and everyone went out of their way to come say hi to Dad and find out how our summit day went. Other tourists, Nepalese guides, as well as porters were happy to see that Dad made it successfully. They would shake his hand vigorously and slap his back in congratulations. I wondered for a moment if I would've had this attention if I had been alone...yeah, probably not. Father's are like puppies...they are cute and innocent. Some American hiking friends even bought us beers as we sat and celebrated our accomplishments together.

The day was slow, easy, and needed. The next day we would be back on the trail...



~16~

A River Runs Thru It

The sign read Welcome to Marpha! Delightful Apple Capital of Nepal. I wondered if Johnny Appleseed was the mayor of this little town along the Annapurna Circuit. Aside from the Thorung La Pass, Marpha seemed to be the highlight of the circuit. We had been hearing about the 'Apple Capital' for days now from other hikers. It was finally time to experience it ourselves.

We had an easy hiking day today. We stayed off the new road and Bishnu instead led us through a flat riverbed away from the dusty, boring, road. The good news is that the hike was completely flat today. Therefore we could take our time and slowly traverse the riverbed.

This side of the Thorung La Pass was different than our last 2 weeks of hiking. It was more touristed, more modern, windier, and strangely more barren. The riverbed was massive and filled with rocks of various sizes while the surrounding mountains jutted up pointing to the heavens. As we hiked, I imagined the whole valley flooded with a web of fast flowing rivers during the monsoon season.

We watched in excitement every time we saw a small plane fly overhead arriving and taking off from the Jomson airport. As if we had been stranded on a island, the plane and accompanying sound was the sign of civilization; something we hadn't experienced in a long time. Additionally, maneuvering landings and take-offs at 10,000 ft between mountain peaks isn't something a pilot takes for granted; we enjoyed the show.

Children followed us as we hiked along; they were on their way to school and I handed out tattered post cards of America for them to take to their class and share. They giggled with glee upon receiving a post card and seemed to guard it as if it were gold plated.

One surprising thing that we started to encounter was cars. However, it wasn't the typical car, it was an early model Toyota Corolla – and they were everywhere. It seemed this is where Toyota Corolla's came to live out their last years of life; here in this riverbed. I wasn't really sure if these cars that were parked alongside run down houses even were functional. However I felt like they had to be functional else how would have they ever made it here to these high altitude resting places? For a moment I wondered if donkey trains (or even porters) brought them up part by part; it certainly wouldn't have surprised me if that were the case! Maybe I'd see a transmission and a steering wheel on a donkey pass me by today.

The sign to Marpha reminded us that we were entering something unique – the Delightful Apple Capital. The town was nestled into a colorful hillside with flags of temples poking out as sky scrapers. There was one narrow main path into town and one bypass around town for the buses and other random, dusty vehicles to utilize.

Marpha was unlike any village on the circuit. As we walked into the pristine town my first impression was “This is Nepal?” The entire town of stone buildings were painted in white with burnt red trimmed doors and windows. It was an out of place gem much like the blue and white island of [Santorini Greece](#) or the blue hill town of [Chefchaouen Morocco](#). The main path thru Marpha was spotless and lined with souvenir shops and

guesthouses. The storefronts showed off their best big apple pies and crumbles in bakery cases enticing you to enter. I rubbed my eyes trying to clear my vision; I felt as if I was Alice and had fell down the rabbit hole...where was I?

In [Vietnam I would eat fresh fruit](#) every day; however, hiking in Nepal made me fruit deficient. I think I had one orange and one apple in the last 2 weeks! The piles of apples stacked elegantly along the path was calling my name! Marpha was my fruit savior!

After a lunch of soup, apple juice and apple pie we went off exploring the narrow pathways of Marpha. As we walked around taking photos we surprisingly ran into an old friend, Jacque. I had last seen Jacque in Manang when he said goodbye to me through my door as [I was severely sick](#) and feverish. I never imagined I'd see him again as he was days ahead of us. However, this trail is like a small town in a way; you run into people you know all the time – a weird sensation in a foreign country.

My dad had a fabulous analogy of friendships along the Annapurna circuit. It's as if the circuit is a stream and you and a friend drop a twig in the water from opposite banks. The twigs float downstream at different paces. Sometimes they meet and they float apart again. Sometimes one gets stuck in a place and swirls around a bit and then breaks free; eventually the two twigs meet again.

We found Jacque 'swirling' in Marpha and it allowed us to catch-up with him. This time I could at least stand upright! It was great to reconnect with friends we've made along the way. He and his guide Yam had a good trek over the pass. They had changed their plans to avoid the new roads and kept Marpha as their home base spending their days trekking to the nearby villages.

Besides eating apples and shopping, there's plenty to see around Marpha. We trekked to a government run distillery and saw how they made the famous Marpha Apple Brandy. It seemed to me that the process and operation was similar to how my grandfather made moonshine in his barn!

We also hiked to a Tibetan Refuge Camp in a beautiful forested setting along the river. The camp was funded and provided by the Nepalese government and had been in operation for many, many years. Kids and animals were everywhere! The locals were working on a large restoration project on their temple.

They let us in to view the progress and collect a small donation. The temple was dark , dusty and filled with old Buddha statues and drums. I felt as if I had walked onto the set of Indiana Jones – minus the snakes plus a thick layer of dust.

That night we had some great food and of course more apple treats; apple crumble. Then suddenly another branch in the river found us. Our friend Ramen (who we met on summit day) walked into our guesthouse with a bottle of Apple Brandy and some friends he met along the trail. It turned into a party as we all sat and enjoyed our brandy sharing stories and laughing into the night. This river was full of old friends who floated in and out of our Annapurna Circuit.



~17~

Carbo Loading

Whoever said carbs aren't good for you never hiked in Nepal. When hiking for 2 weeks, carbs become your ally. This is probably the one time when you can get away with eating carbs at every meal, so my best advice is – enjoy the hell out of it.

I can't say the food was spectacular on the Annapurna Circuit, in fact I actually lost weight on the 21 day hike! However, the variety of food produced out of a kitchen with a log flame for a stove was amazing. Given the inherent challenges with getting food supplies to high altitude villages via donkey, the guesthouses did a good job of putting together a western friendly menu. I recently heard from a reader, Jay, about his experiences on the Annapurna Circuit in 1983 – when western type menus didn't exist

on the circuit! It was dhal bhat every day for Jay!

The western food choices were everywhere; Yak steak in Manang, apple pie in Marpha, pizza in Dharapani, and pancakes in Pisang. However these familiar names didn't always have a familiar look. It was the Nepalese take on these western staples. They did their best they could given the ingredients they had to work with. I quickly learned to not set my expectations very high and accept anything that was put in front of me! I was thankful I had some western options. Granted, those options were the exact same everywhere with subtle differences. At any guesthouse you could expect the choices to fall into one of these menu categories:

- Potato Dishes
- Noodle Dishes
- Rice Dishes
- Soup Dishes
- Bread Dishes
- Dhal Bhat Dishes
- Egg /Porridge Dishes
- Hot Drinks
- Cold Drinks

Mmmm——Carbs!

Dhal Bhat Power 24 Hour

The local dish of **Dhal Bhat** (beans, rice, & vegetable curry) was one of my favorite things to order. It always tasted good – but more importantly you received free refills of any food item in the Dhal Bhat platter. Dhal Bhat is served on little metal trays that look like frozen TV dinner trays. Each item had its own little compartmentalized area on the plate. Apparently Nepalese aren't fond of their food touching.

Once given the plate full of rice and a soupy bean mixture you poured the soupy beans over the rice, and scooped up the hot mixture with your hands. Traditionally the Nepalese don't use utensils. They have a whole process of holding their fingers in such a way that they could shovel large amounts of food into their mouth with one hand. I was always in awe of this ability. My Dad even gave it a go without utensils once. He did

pretty well in my standards, but he was basically entertainment for the locals who tried to stifle laughter.

When you ran low on rice or beans, someone would come over to the table with a big bowl and ladle and give you more. It was as if the all you can eat buffet came to you; you didn't even have to go to the effort to get up and walk over to a buffet. However, in Kathmandu you were treated to a 'fancier' version of Dhal Bhat which included many more little bowls of veggies and beans including a homemade yogurt to ease the spiciness of the curry.

Dhal Bhat was the perfect food for trekking – the guides and porters ate Dhal Bhat 2 times a day every day; providing them energy for the day to carry heavy loads and deal with foreigners!

Pasta Nepalese Style

Every time I sat down to eat at a guest house, it was as if I had sauntered up to the blackjack table at Caesars Palace; it was a gamble. You try the spaghetti at one place and it's good, but then you try it again a couple of guest houses later and it's completely different. You learn to look at food not as an experience, but as nutrition. This can be a hard transition to make sometimes for tourists who treat eating as a overall experience of presentation, smell, and taste. Many times the spaghetti on the menu was simply noodles with ketchup. Or the cheese macaroni was really just macaroni noodles with a 'sheet' of hard melted cheese over the top that didn't really stick to the macaroni at all because the guesthouses were so cold!

We quickly came to learn that Nepalese lasagna was not at all like our version of lasagna made of layered pasta, sauce, and cheese. On the Annapurna circuit lasagna meant fettuccine noodles served on a hot skillet with meat, veggies and cheese stir fried in. All the same ingredients in a way – but a different presentation.

Hot Beer and Cold Showers – Drinks

Inevitably the beer was always hot and the showers always cold – but at least it was predictable...and the beer ALWAYS tasted good after hiking all day! Some guesthouses would even serve popcorn as appetizers! The usual beer of choice was the local beer – Everest. However the cheaper version of alcohol came in the form of moonshine called Roxy. It was cheap and potent, but it worked faster than Advil when it came to taking

away my hiking aches and pains.

The main non-alcoholic drink was [tea](#). Milk tea, masala tea, and lemon tea seemed to be the favorites. We'd get a extra large thermos of tea at night and keep it in our room to have a hot drink in the morning when we got up and started packing . I also tried the infamous seabuckthorn juice along the trail. Neon orange in color, seabuckthorn juice is made from small berries and was similar to orange juice.

A Sweet Tooth

The joy of hiking 7 hours a day – you can always have dessert. Someone in Nepal learned that foreigners love sweets – specifically sweets made of bread. When you think about the Himalayas you naturally think cinnamon rolls – right? Nearly every village had a bakery; and I think we visited nearly every bakery! In fact, Dad and I had our share of cinnamon rolls with beer chasers. Don't cringe until you've tried it! In addition to cinnamon rolls, there were other baked goods such as apple pie, chocolate cake, and rice pudding.

Most importantly, we never went hungry on the Annapurna Circuit. I was really surprised with the variety of food choices on the circuit; there's really no reason why you'd have to bring your own snacks along as the guesthouses along the circuit have plenty to keep you energized. Save space in your pack, support the local guesthouses and bakeries along the way. They exist there for you, the trekkers; the locals certainly aren't eating at these establishments! Considering how far along food has evolved since Jay trekked in 1983, I can only imagine that when I go back again, they'll be serving coq au vin and ice cream parlors will dot the trail!



~18~

Danger! Curves Ahead

How do you define a road? It's all relative – right? I had long ago left behind my vision of what a road should be once I started long term travel in places like Kenya [Mongolia](#), [Laos](#), and Vietnam. Shoulders are for sissies and horns are an art form. I thought I was used to dangerous roads, but today I met my match.

I had my last apple pancake early in the morning with a strong cup of coffee. I was sad to be leaving the unique town of [Marpha](#), but we had to keep to our schedule. We were still trying to make up days since we had taken longer than expected to get over the pass. Making up days was relatively easy to do since on this side of the pass because there are 'roads' – at least that's what the locals call them. We went outside of Marpha and waited along the side of the road to catch a bus that would take us down the mountain into Tatopani. By foot this would have taken us two days, but by bus we were told it would take about 5 hours.

We waited at the 'bus stop' with Bishnu, Diehl, and a handful of other tourists; we huddled together to stay warm on this chilly morning. We were still in the shadow of the mountain as the sun hadn't risen high enough to bake us yet. The bus of course was running on 'Nepali' time so we stood around and froze for an hour; our emotions dashed every time another bus passed us by.

Finally our bus arrived and we piled on with the locals. Our bags were 'secured' on top of the bus with a mountain of other bags and camping gear. I tried to not think about my laptop precariously perched atop the bus as if it were a cherry on top of an ice cream sundae. We squeezed into our cold seats as bags too big to be put on top were thrown in the aisle. Large bags in the bus aisle meant that passengers had to walk on top of them to get on and off the bus; which is really not much different from the terrain we had been hiking in/on for the last 2 weeks!

The bus of course was over capacity; capacity doesn't really have much meaning in Asia. If there is space, it will be used. With a long blow of the musical horn, we were off on a harrowing adventure. Our little top-heavy bus took off lurching side to side like a drunk elephant teetering along a plank; I was immediately on edge.

We started off on a relatively good road. It was spacious in Asian standards with a gradual decline. It was dry season which meant massive amounts of dust were in the air – so thick at times it was like a fog. Other trucks would pass us on the road leaving a thick layer of dust to waft around the bus. In order to protect myself from inhaling dust for 5 hours, I wrapped my pashmina around my head so all you could see were my eyes; [a trick I learned in the Sahara Desert](#). My dad was sitting by the window and didn't seem phased. He was looking out the window like a child, mesmerized by the landscape.

As we continued on, the road seemed to become more narrow and the decline more steep. Dried tire ruts became more prevalent and soon it seemed that we were on a one lane road descending down a windy mountain-side. I tried to disappear mentally for the next 4 hours as I rocked from side to side as if I were on a ship on the ocean.

As the jolts and rocking became worse, and travel became even slower I became more anxiety ridden. I vacillated between fear and anger; I wondered who in the world deemed this a drivable road?! Occasionally I'd hear the guy on my left say "Oh my God"; which would instinctively cause me to open my eyes jolting me back to my terrifying bus reality.

Even though I had authored a piece about [How to Survive Being a Passenger](#) last year, I wasn't able to take my own advice. I was so scared I was paralyzed. My mind kept on telling me to take pictures and video as this would be a fabulous experience to share on the blog! However I was so scared that I couldn't bring myself to open my bag and get out my camera. Apparently no one else has taken pictures of this road because I scoured the web trying to find some to accompany this post and found virtually nothing! At a rest stop I took this one photo of Dad by the bus – that was the best I could do!

My fear made me mute. I didn't say anything to my Dad, I just wanted to disappear under my pashmina. My dad tried to strike up a conversation with me. He asked me if I saw them load up the bus; he thought it looked pretty top heavy and wondered how the bus driver dealt with that. I looked at him in anger and told him I didn't want to talk about it! He must have understood how scared I was as he never said another word to me on the trip!

Normally on these types of bus/car rides I can find an inner peace; feeling good about the life I've lived and accepting that the ride could very well be the last of my life. However this bus ride was different. As hard as I tried' inner peace would not come. Maybe this was because my dad was sitting next to me and I once again felt this unusual sense of responsibility. I kept thinking about my mom and siblings and what they would think of this crazy ride I had brought my father on. I think I can accept dangerous situations when I'm solo, but when I've convinced someone else to come with me, it creates a sense of responsibility; I've put them in a dangerous situation.

Meeting another vehicle meant a slow, complex maneuver with one of the vehicles

hanging practically off the edge of the 'road' as little rocks slid down the steep mountainside. Once I looked out of my pashmina and saw TWO buses coming towards us; when I saw the maneuvering going on I quickly clamped my eyes shut again and tried to find my happy place.

Our luck ran out when we were in a wet area near a river. We drove through a waterfall and got stuck in the muddy ruts. The driver tried his best to free the bus from the mud, but eventually gave up and motioned for everyone to get off the bus. We had to shuffle out, climbing over the bags in the aisle. I wondered if the driver and conductor were going to make us push! Luckily they maneuvered their way out of the soft rut and then we all piled back into the bus 30 feet up the road.

Soon the bus started picking up even more people; locals who needed to catch a short ride to Tatopani. They sat on top of the bags in the aisle. This last leg of the trip was the worst. The narrow road was carved out of a mountain side with hairpin curves. We teetered and sputtered down the dusty mountain at a snails pace. If someone would have given me the option to get out and walk, I would have. My own two feet had to be safer than this bus!

The road from Marpha to Tatopani is relatively new. It was just completed in 2009. I personally think the only reason why it wasn't included in this list of the [World's Most 10 Most Dangerous Roads](#) is because it is so new. I predict that it will easily make it's way into the Top 10 this year.

After 5 hours we finally arrived in Tatopani where I swaggered off the bus, dusted myself off and promptly followed Bishnu to guesthouse where I could take a shower, sit down in a stable place, and have a beer. Alcohol at altitude is always good to calm the nerves! The silver (or should I say pink) lining was the sunset that evening – reminding how great it is to be alive!



~19~

Going Up...AGAIN

We had been on the trail now for 18 days. We no longer had that rookie look in our eyes. We were no longer surprised by cold showers, the same menu, donkeys squeezing by us on the trail. We were old timers. We had 4 days on the trail before we hung up our boots in retirement. Dad and I had one last pass to get over, and then on to civilization.

Today we were starting a two-day climb...yes climb. Even though we had peaked on the Thorung La Pass 3 days earlier, it wasn't all downhill from there. Instead it was downhill – and then uphill again to 9075 ft and then back downhill into Pokhara. However what made this climb different was that this was stress free hiking. Unlike Thorung La Pass,

we knew we could make it to Ghorepani at a mere 9075 ft – no problem. It's really amazing how enjoyable it can be when you aren't constantly worried about "will I make it?"

Tatopani was a nice stop for us once I calmed myself from my [harrowing bus ride](#). Tatopani is a popular stop along the Annapurna Circuit thanks to its natural hot springs; trekkers tend to use it as a rejuvenation stop before continuing the upward climb to Ghorepani. Try as I might, I'm not really a Hot Springs gal. I realized this must run in the family, as my dad also had no interest in the hot springs. Instead, my father and I decided to simply use Tatopani as a good internet and beer stop skipping the famous hot springs.

Instead, Tatopani offered me a special kind of therapy that my body was craving; fruit therapy. The little village was tropical compared to the high altitude peaks we had come from. Orange and lime trees were abundant and my body welcomed some sweet/sour citrus fruit into my system; better than any hot springs in my opinion!

Leaving Tatopani after a hearty breakfast including fresh orange juice, we were energized for our climb. We hadn't really done any strenuous hiking since the pass, but that was going to change today. We were at 4,580 ft and had to climb to 9,075 ft in two days.

The trail to Ghorepani took us back among the rice fields and functioning villages – a welcome site. The villages before this at higher altitudes seemed to mainly exist for the circuit trekkers, but the villages we walked thru today were farming villages full of kids and families who lived there year around. Kids along the trail sold sweet green oranges bursting with flavor; I of course put a few in my pack.

After a good morning hike we stopped for Daal Bhat and corn bread. As we were getting up to leave, an old friend 'floated' by – Roman. We had been meeting and leaving Roman for the past 4 days on the trail; each time thinking it would be our last to see each other. The 'river' of the Annapurna Circuit never ceased to amaze me – depositing friends floating down the 'river' when you least expected it. Roman trekked with us to Shikha where we were to stay for the night. We said our final goodbyes as he headed for the big climb to Ghorepani and dad and I settled down for a relaxing night in Shikha.

Shikha wasn't exactly a normal stop on the trail; they had a few guest houses. Shikha

was mainly a functioning village full of farmers and herders. It was great to be back in a non-touristy village. We spend our afternoon walking around the village watching the villagers go about their afternoon chores; thrashing beans, feeding goats, milking cows, and making baskets. Of course the kids came running down home from school and offered a wealth of entertainment for us posing as 'models'.

The next morning we knew we had a challenging climb to Ghorepani, so we ate a hearty breakfast of porridge and started the climb. We walked with kids on their way to school; brothers and sisters walking in cheap flip flops hand in hand bounding up the steep mountain to go to primary school; a typical day for them as we were gasping for air. It was fun however to see the hillside come to life in the golden morning sun. Villagers were out harvesting their hillside crops; serenading us as we walked by.

As we walked up a seemingly never-ending array of stone steps, various parts of my body cried out in exhaustion. Strangely my whole body seemed to be itching too. I tried to ignore it and get into a hiking rhythm. I was able to get a second wind and decided I would speed up a bit and take fewer breaks; mainly because I wanted to be done with this day of climbing and those damn steps! I took off and found myself quickly all alone on the trail. I hit my stride and arrived in Ghorepani about 20 minutes ahead of dad, Bishnu and Diehl. It actually felt great to work that hard and sweat profusely; I had earned my cinnamon roll today!

I sat on the wall itchy and hungry waiting for my crew to arrive taking in the lovely views of Ghorepani and dealing with a tinge of sadness knowing this was our last big climb on the circuit.

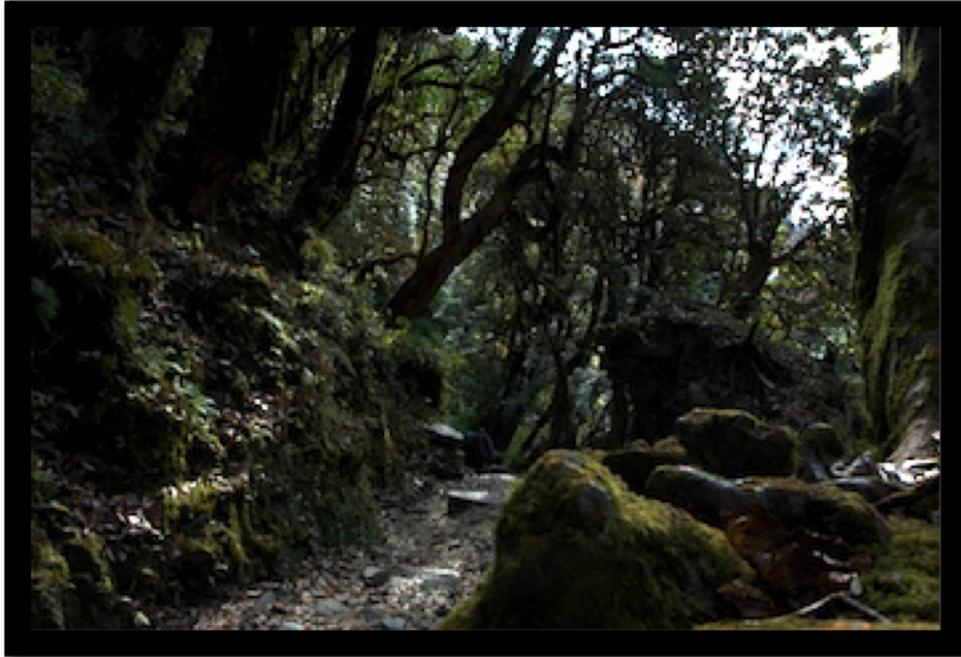
We checked into an ugly little room; but it came with a hot shower...a real HOT shower. I had been waiting for a good shower for a while now and quickly called dibs for the first shot to use the shower! Unfortunately I thought my itchiness was due to the fact I was wearing the same dirty, sweaty clothes for the last 3 days, but I quickly realized that it was a rash all over my body! Apparently I was having an allergic reaction to the antibiotics I had been taking since [falling ill in Manang](#) . The saga never ends. I took some allergy pills and put on lose fitting, clean clothes and tried to ignore the itchiness.

Sadly, Ghorepani was a disappointment. Maybe I had too high of expectations (which is usually the case) since I had to work so hard to get to the mountaintop town. I was disappointed because it appeared to be just another tourist town; cold and thrown

together like a bunch of legos. No real locals lived here, but they came here to work at guest houses for the tourist season. Two men dressed in ethnic garb, stood in the town 'center' with violins and played the same exact tune for 4 hours for tourists in hopes of donations. Dad and I sat and watched as 'newbie tourists' were enthralled by the singing and dancing and then were hit up for money. It felt as if we didn't belong here with the rest of the tourists; as if we had been banished to the 'kiddie pool' after swimming in the deep end. It just wasn't exciting or authentic as the past days going over the pass. Let's face it – we were old timers existing on the trail for 19 days, and here was the new batch of rookies coming all wide-eyed and fresh. The little town tried to be charming by painting all of the metal buildings and roofs blue; but it all fell gravely short if you ask me. It really existed, in all of its blueness for tourists; mainly the ones who came from Pokhara and wanted to hike to Poon Hill

Ghorepani is seen as a nice alternative for tourists who don't want to do the whole Annapurna circuit, but want to do a short hike with views of the peaks. It is a short day or two-day hike from the big tourist town of Pokhara. Many groups came to Ghorepani to see the sun rise at [Poon Hill viewpoint](#), and then hike back down. In order to see the sunrise, you need to get up at 4:30 AM to trek up 1.500 ft. to the viewpoint and see the sunrise on a clear day. Dad and I talked about it, but decided that we would skip the early rise trek. This was mainly because we felt like we had already been to the Super Bowl...Thorung La Pass; we were among the peaks that the others were vying to get a photo of. For some reason it didn't appeal to us.

Instead us two old-timers had a celebratory beer and cinnamon roll happy we had finished our last major climb. It would be all downhill from here!



~20~

Coming Down to Reality

*Down Dooby Doo Down Down, Comma comma Down Dooby Doo Down Down,
Comma comma Down Dooby Doo Down Down Leaving Annapurna is Haaarrrrddd....
toooooooooo.... doooooo...*

I couldn't get this tune out of my head. Probably because there was nowhere to go now but down.

Our downward path first led us through the 'enchanted' Rotadendrum forest as we left Ghorepani and the white peaks behind. The forest was beautiful and creepy at the same time. Rays of sun made their way through the mossy green foliage poking thru crooked tree branches with powerful light rays. The scene was made even more eerie by the incessant sound of singing locust in the trees. I wouldn't have been surprised if the headless horseman reared up in front of me.

After a couple of hours, we left the locust and enchanted forest behind and popped out on a terraced hillside bustling with harvest activity. It was as if we had broken out of a fog – the whole landscape changed in a few small steps.

The trail was like the super highway. People were on their way up to Ghorepani and fast people were practically sprinting down towards Pokhara. It was fun to meet all of the fresh faced trekkers just starting their adventure – it actually made me feel very happy to be where we were – near the end of our circuit and closer than ever to a good shower and real bed.

We stopped for lunch at the picturesque hill town of Ulleri and then started the knee crushing stairway to Hell...oops...I mean stairway to Hile. We had already read about this challenge in our guide book...the dreaded 3,283 steps down to Hile descending over 1,879 feet. Truth be known, we had already been going down steps for the last 40 minutes of trekking so my dodgy runner's knee was already feeling the effects of the steep stone descent.

I knew this would pose the greatest challenge for my dad too. His descending skills were far worse than his climbing skills – it obviously ran in the family. To make it worse the descent was on the open hillside with no shade. Just switchbacks of 'stairs' – uneven, haphazard stones placed like stairs. After all – there weren't the steps to the public library – they were 'trail' steps. It could've been worse though – we could have been going up the stairs!

All I could think about as I planted my hiking pole on the step below to take pressure off my knee was , "Who in their right mind actually counted these steps?!" Seriously – how did they know there were 3,283 – that's bullshit. We had been descending stairs steadily for an hour, nearing the bottom and knee relief when we came across the chicken porters. Actually you could first smell them, then you could see them. At one point on the trail, it was like an animal super highway; chicken couped porters, a donkey train, and herd of sheep all converged on the steps. Are there animal rules for who has the right of way? Dr. Doolittle would know the answer to that question I bet.

We slept in Hile that night after a good beer and popcorn; you could tell that we were getting much closer to civilization now...popcorn was a special treat! We slept late the

next morning and had a easy rolling 3 hour downhill hike to Birethanthi. We took our time and observed all of the harvesting in the fields and kids going to school. Birethanthi was really the last village on the circuit and we could've easily went on to Pokhara but instead we soaked up one more lazy afternoon of peace, simplicity, and mountain peaks.

That night Bishnu, Deihl, Dad, and I celebrated our last night together with Roxie (Nepali moonshine); reliving some of the best moments on our circuit hike thru the hundreds of photos I had taken. I think we were 2 of about 10 people actually overnighing in Birethanthi; the comforts of Pokhara were too enticing for most hikers who had been on the circuit for over 18 days!

The next morning we had breakfast and put on our packs one last time. As soon as we crossed over the bridge out of Birethanthi we left the trekking village world behind as if we had went thru the exit of Disneyworld...the fantasy was over. We entered a grittier, charmless area with shops lining a muddy road. The people I saw might have been better off financially but in the case of village life I'm convinced less is more. It felt as if we were walking through slums in a way – or maybe I was just adjusting my perspective back to 'reality'.

Then the real jolt happened. The sound of a loud bus horn blew at an annoying pitch. It was like nails on a chalkboard ; the noise echoed through my skull and I let out a sigh.

For my dad and I , the Annapurna Circuit was finished.





~21~

Wheels on the Bus Go Round and Round

The clutch and part of the transmission area lying on the ground next to the bus. I hear the sounds of a wrench taking more of the vital organs of the bus apart. This is going to be a long trip back to Kathmandu.

You haven't really been to Nepal until you have spent a few hours in a Tata mechanic's garage. Bus travel in Nepal is a necessary evil; and if you are in the right frame of mind, it can actually be tolerable and maybe even fun. At times, slow travel can be the most

cultural part of one's journey in Nepal and other times it can be a nightmare.

Dad and I decided to save money and take the tourist bus from Pokhara to Kathmandu; a 6 hour bus ride. This tourist bus is basically slightly nicer than a local bus and doesn't stop for every local carrying a goat on the side of the road. Plus no people or animals ride on top; it's practically civilized.

We left the Pokhara exactly on time 7AM. At 7:11 we were pulling into the TaTa garage after 11 minutes of painfully grinding gears and never making it out of 2nd gear. Most people were visibly upset, and got out of the bus to get some air and bitch. I decided to recline the seat and read my book. Sounds of wrenches and various air powered tools filled the garage. In a way it was an opportunity for my dad to see what my normal travels really felt like; the ups and the downs.

However when I saw our transmission pull apart and 2 guys put it on the ground; the travel patience stakes were raised a notch.

Dad seemed satisfied and relaxed about the whole thing. As a retired engineer, he was in his element. He had got out of the bus to watch the mechanics. For a moment I thought he might be trying to help them out. After two hours of waiting around having them try to put the bus back together, a new bus showed up. I imagined the flurry of phone calls that had just taken place in Pokhara trying to secure another bus, driver, and conductor (they come as a package) to drive tourists to Kathmandu. Two lucky men got the job on what was supposed to be their day off, but of course took the work because in Nepal you take whatever work you can find.

We all moved our bags from the old bus to the new bus and piled onto our similar seats. It wasn't quite as posh as the last bus, in fact it was actually rather uncomfortable – but it was moving and could make it to 4th gear; we were making progress.

The trip back to Kathmandu was full of excitement. First it was done at fast speeds since the bus was trying to make up time. Second, it was picturesque; the hillsides were alive with families' harvesting. Third, it was a test of my iron bladder since the behind schedule bus wasn't stopping for ANYTHING! My dad took on this trip as a trooper – he had been acclimated into Nepal now. He was a backpacker now...a senior backpacker!

As we began to climb the steep road that would deposit us into Kathmandu valley, we

came to a grinding halt. A traffic jam about 10 km long was in front of us; this is what happens when you leave 2 hrs late from Pokhara. However it was made worse due to the Maoist demonstrations in Kathmandu valley scheduled for today. It had brought the already terrible traffic to a halt in the valley. However we slowly moved along the climb over the course of 2 hours.

As we finally arrived back in the valley it was already pitch dark and the journey which was meant to take us 6 hrs, took 12 hours. After only sharing a can of Pringles and cans of Diet Coke for lunch my dad and I were starving. But first we had to somehow get back to Thamel and the [Ambassador Garden Home Hotel](#) where we had a reservation.

Luckily our guardian angel tour operator, [Giri](#), somehow found out we were delayed and showed up to pick us up 6 hours late. Giri runs [Nepal Tourism & Travels](#), the tour company we utilized, and I have to say, even though he was in Kathmandu, he was with us every step of the way on the trail as he regularly checked in with us and our guide Bishnu via mobile phone. He was like a protective father figure to us; especially when I was sick in Manang. Because I knew him from my past volunteer experiences in Nepal, I think that he felt he had a greater than normal responsibility to ensure my father's safety. One thing I love about this part of the world is the amount of respect the cultures have for their elders; something I think is dying in the Western cultures.

Seeing Giri after this long arduous journey was a breath of fresh air; a familiar face in the chaos. He took us to our hotel, ensured we got the best room, sat us down for an amazing meal of Dhal Bhat (the best I had in Nepal) and joined us for a cold beer.

Dad and I were happy to be back in Kathmandu. All we had left to do was see Kathmandu, buy souvenirs, and relax; at least that's what I thought...



~22~

Visa Required

Even though I didn't start traveling internationally until I was 30 years old, I've done a lot of traveling; some people may even consider me an 'expert'. I'm not real sure if I deserve the 'expert' title, but there are certainly a few things I've learned about international travel.

You need a valid passport to travel. That passport shouldn't expire within 6 months of you traveling. You need to have at least 2 empty (non-stamped) pages in your passport. Countries require a visa to enter their country and sometimes that costs money. However, if you are only passing through the country via the airport, you don't need a visa if you are simply transiting through the airport.

At least that's what I thought.

Dad and I were leaving in two days on Jet Airways (an International Indian airline). We were flying out of Kathmandu together to Delhi where we would split up and then go separate ways. I was headed to Sri Lanka from Delhi and my dad was going to Singapore. The Singapore Jet Airways flight goes from Delhi to Chennai (also India), THEN to Singapore. Neither one of us were staying in India, we were simply passing through.

We had been advised to confirm our flights so Giri, our [tour operator](#) manager handled that for us. He took our passports and had someone run to the Jet Airways office to confirm our flights. We sat in Giri's office going thru our photos of the circuit and making plans for lunch with his family the next day.

The phone rang in his office, there was a problem with our tickets; my heart sank. This is not the news you want to hear in Nepal two days before you are supposed to leave. Dad didn't have an Indian visa in his passport. I immediately thought...hmmm...this must be a translation issue, he didn't need an Indian Visa, he wasn't staying there. We tried to explain that we didn't need a visa, he was traveling to Singapore and simply had layovers in India.

Over the next hour of arguments and explanations which made little sense to me, we learned if dad was to get on a plane in two days, he would need an in-transit visa for India. Apparently, since we flew into Delhi and he needed to change planes in Delhi and fly to Chennai, his flight to Chennai would originate out of the domestic airport in Delhi. The Domestic airport is right next to the International airport. You simply go out side and into the next building.

Ah...there laid the problem...he had to go outside.

Damn.

It didn't matter that his final destination was Singapore, nor did it matter that it was all Jet Airway's flights. This was a strange black hole of visa requirements encountered only in odd situations like this at the Delhi airport.

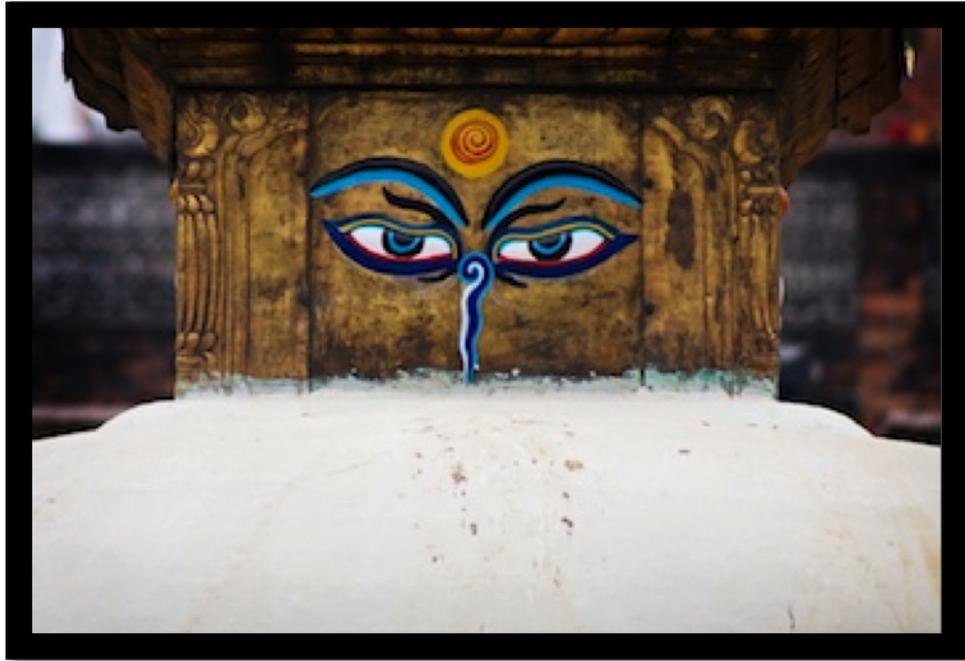
We gave in, we next had to figure out how to somehow get an in-transit Indian visa in less than 36 hours. An [Indian visa](#) can normally take weeks to get and it's never an easy process. There's only one way to do it...you know someone who knows someone who you pay off to get it for you. One good thing about undeveloped countries, sometimes bribes can work in your favor. At least it's a viable option that you can take.

We looked at all of our options and consulted with Giri who was intent on helping us through this issue no matter what. We decided to go the 'pay a friend' route. Giri knew someone who knew someone at the Indian Embassy who reportedly could get an in-transit visa for a slightly higher fee than taking the regular route. I don't know that I would've went this route unless I had known Giri so well; he was a friend. I trusted that he had our best interests in mind and he genuinely wanted to help us. He had been our guardian angel so far on this trip, and that wasn't going to change now.

The woman from the embassy came to Giri's office, she reassured us that she could get the visa by the next day, we paid her the money, and we said a little prayer to the travel Gods that it would all work out.

Luckily – it did. Money talks.

Never again will I assume that I know about travel – at least when it comes to visas and India!



~23~

Kathmandu – A Personal Tour

This week is a special week – I’m devoting my posts this week to Kathmandu. However I don’t feel like being as ‘wordy’ as I normally am – instead I want the photographs to do the talking (However, this post is the exception!). I’m going to abandon my normal posting schedule; instead each day this week I will release a photo essay on Kathmandu – the people, buildings, markets, and sites.

The first time I came to Kathmandu in 2008 it defeated me. I was in [major culture shock](#). But slowly the city with all of it’s noise, dirt, color, and people charms you. From that first trip I made some lifelong friends – the Gurung family from Puma. My dad and I only had one day left on our Nepal adventure. The 25 days seemed to go fast, and there was something bittersweet about our last day. Not only were we leaving this magical country we experienced together, but we were also leaving our friends.

After a morning of exploring Dubar Square, Giri invited us to his family's home to meet his brother, sister-in-law, niece, and nephew. We gladly accepted. For me, any chance to see how local people live is my travel 'high'. In addition, I knew we'd get some great food! Giri picked us up in his car and took my father and I outside of the tourist area of Thamel. The noise became more faint, the motorbikes and rickshaws started to disappear, the old run down buildings evaporated before my eyes; to my surprise we entered a normalcy in Kathmandu. We had left the mad house and arrived in suburbia.

We were welcomed into his home with open arms and enjoyed sitting and talking to his very well-educated and traveled family. His brother and family had lived in Singapore for the last 20 years as a [Gurkha](#). The conversation was wonderful, but the food was even better. By far this was the best meal I had on this trip. We had Dhal Bhat, chicken wings, curd, juice and the food never seemed to stop!

After lunch Giri surprised us with another treat – a personal tour from him of the sites of Kathmandu. We went to Boudhanath Temple, Pashupati Temple, Monkey Temple, and even saw the boarding school that Giri himself attend as a young boy.

For me there is nothing better than having a local show you around, it was pure joy to not have to worry about where to go, who to trust, how to get there...we could simply enjoy ourselves on our last day.

~23 1/2~

After 26 days traveling with my father in Nepal, we parted at the Delhi airport. I found myself choking back tears as I gave him a hug and we parted. Why was I, a person who typically travels solo, crying about being solo again? I wish I knew.



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Best and Worst of the Annapurna Circuit

Near the end of hiking the circuit, my father and I reminisced on some of our best and worst experiences over the past 21 days. We compiled a list of the best / worst of our Annapurna Circuit experience. Remember...this is only our opinion!

	My Dad	Me
Best Food	Onion Tomato Lasagna in Marpha (so good he had it for lunch and dinner!)	Dharapani's Mushroom noodle soup and Momos

<p>Best Guest House</p>	<p>It was unanimous...our Gunsang guest house had the best hospitality there was and a great view that you would never tire of. Not to mention our ensuite toilet!</p>	
<p>Worst Guest House</p>	<p>Also unanimous – the first guesthouse we stayed in with the bucket shower in the smelly outhouse was the worst. They people were super nice, but the rooms left something to be desired. Since we experience the ‘worst’ on the first night – we had nowhere to go be up from there!</p>	
<p>Best Village</p>	<p>Marpha – the apple capital!</p>	<p>agreed with Marpha for it’s clean and colorful décor, but the little village of Shikha came in a close 2nd!</p>
<p>Worst Village</p>	<p>Unanimous again... Ghorepani. Maybe this was due to the fact that we had to work so hard to get up there, and then realized it was just an over-touristed village with no character...and crappy cinnamon rolls!</p>	
<p>Most surprising thing about Nepal</p>	<p>the people were so friendly, courteous, and welcoming.</p>	<p>the country gets better the on the 2nd trip...I never thought it was possible to get any better!</p>

One thing you wish you would've brought with you	More Tiger Balm!	Clothes pins
The one thing you should've left at home.	Waterproof pants and a pocket knife	Bug Spray
Most difficult thing to adapt to	The altitude of course!	Wearing the same clothes for 5 days+ in a row.
Scariest Moment	Running from the rock slide and navigating the snow on the other side of the pass.	The narrow trails with big drop offs, the bus ride to Tatopani, and of course the mouse in my bed!
Lasting Memory	the experience in Puma was on top of his list, followed by the Thorung La Pass	My return to the village of Puma was also special – but it was a lasting memory because I was able to bring my dad with me and introduce him to Puma this time.
Why should people come to Nepal?	A lot of people shouldn't; this type of 'roughing it' isn't for everyone. However for the people that enjoy a simpler way of travel, you should come to see how hard people work to make a little living. How appreciative they are about little things we take for granted.	You should come to see the mountains, meet some of the nicest people living in the hardest environments.

Also in alignment with the 'Best of' theme – I've also put together a photography album you can view at my Global Photography website – [The Best of Annapurna Circuit Photography](#)

You can also view my [Kathmandu Photography](#) at my Global Photography website.



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Nepal Planning Resources

Tour Operators and Guides

A big part of what made this trip a success was the care we were shown by two very important people on this adventure – Bishnu, our guide and Giri, my friend and tour operator. They were professional, well prepared, and always were looking out for our safety and satisfaction. They are two people I am happy to now call ‘friends’.

There are many big tour operators in Nepal, but please consider helping out the smaller operators!

Giri Gurung Nepal Tourism www.nepaltourismtravels.com.np

Kathmandu Office – Nurshing Chowk, Thamel 17 +977-1-426-1114

Volunteering in Nepal

This was the company I utilized in 2008 when volunteering in the village of Puma. A great local organization that focused on cultural exchange.

Hands for Help Nepal <http://handsforhelp.org.np/>

Lodging in Thamel Kathmandu:

I can't say enough good things about our lodging in Thamel. It was one of my favorite hotels I've stayed at around the world!

Ambassador Garden Home Hotel Review from my website:

In the middle of the craziness of Thamel (the tourist district) I found this gem boutique hotel; a diamond in the ruff! What makes staying at the Ambassador Garden Home Hotel a unique experience is the staff. It feels as you are a member of their family. When my father and I arrived they served us tea and gave us a Tilak blessing. They sat and talked with us about where we were from, as well as educating us about the hotel and their family history. You immediately felt the warmth and passion of this boutique hotel; it felt like you were staying in a friend's home.

Prime Location: Thamel is one of the busiest places in Kathmandu; noisy, crowded, and dirty. However in the heart of Thamel is the Ambassador Garden Home located at one of the main intersections. It's set back from the road and once you step into their 'grounds' you are immediately transported to a peaceful environment – a safe haven from the craziness of [Kathmandu](#).

Environment: The rooms are modern and decorated with class. The whole hotel underwent a major renovation lately. They have infused cultural and family relics throughout the decor. The garden in the back is one of the highlights. Surrounded by a classic brick fence, you feel like it's your little oasis. You can eat out in the garden or simply relax with a book with the fountain dribbling in the background. The garden is where the restaurant was located. It was small and inviting. Breakfast was included with our room; a great set of options to choose from with fresh fruit and eggs. I personally loved the french press coffee brought to the table! However **one of my most memorable meals in Nepal** was served in this little garden. The dhal bhat plate was

fabulous; a bunch of little bowls of dhal and curried veggies. Plus, they even served fresh homemade yogurt to go with the spicy curry.

Atmosphere: What made this hotel one of my favorite stays in the world was the social atmosphere they created. They have melded the idea of a stuffy boutique hotel into a family hostel feel. The owners called you by first name and frequently joined you in the garden – assisting with any travel needs you had. When you arrived, they provided you with a personal welcome letter in your room introducing them, their family, and the history of the hotel. As a frequent solo traveler, I loved how **they introduced you to other people staying at the hotel**. The owner and manager came out at night and sat with guests in the garden; eating dinner with them. At night the whole garden erupted in a social gathering where travelers met and talked about their experiences in Nepal. The manager walked around introducing different sets of tourists creating this open communal feel.

Costs: I thought the rooms were well priced for quality of what you received. We paid approx. \$50USD for a double room which included breakfast, a never ending ‘take-what-you-want’ fruit basket, and wireless internet (even in the rooms!). If you stay for more than 2 nights, they will even send you on a free city tour. Sure, for Thamel and Nepal, this may seem expensive – but **it was an exceptional value when taken the location, quality, and atmosphere**.

Contact: Visit their website at [Ambassador Garden Home Boutique Hotel \(http://ambassadorgardenhomeboutiquehotel.com/\)](http://ambassadorgardenhomeboutiquehotel.com/) you can book directly with them or use discount sites to find other deals.