# Kathmandu To Kent

## Overlanding the Silk Road

# NEPAL CHAPTERS PREVIEW

Keith Pryke

Oenanthe Press

For permission requests, contact the author at contact@keithpryke.com

or visit keithpryke.com for further information

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This is a work of non-fiction based on the author's personal experiences. Names, places, and incidents are accurate to the best of the author's recollection, with some name changes made to assist with the telling of the story

Truck image on title page courtesy of Dragoman Overland

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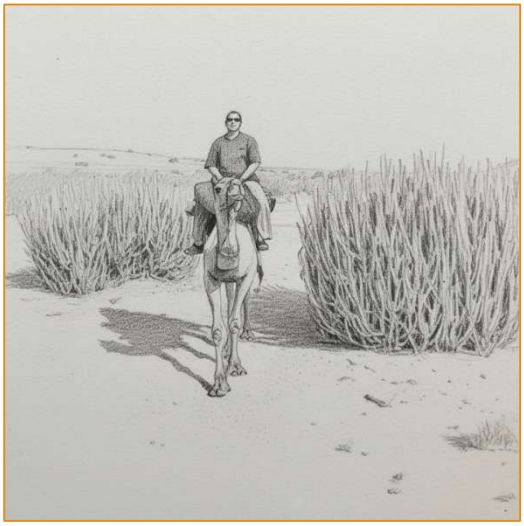
## Preface

# The Silk Road's Ancient Call



The wanderlust that first gripped me in 2002, when I was 25 and fled the drudgery of a London insurance job to work on the sun-drenched shores of Lake Garda in Italy, had by 2005 evolved into something deeper, a craving for the unknown, a transformative adventure that would excite and challenge me.

I had the urge to travel from a young age, reading a lot of travel writing and regularly watching travel documentaries as I grew up, but it was a BBC documentary first broadcast in 1995, when I was 18, that really caught my imagination. Called *On the Road Again*, it followed the journalist Simon Dring as he retraced his overland journey to India along the Silk Road in the 1960s, this time by jeep with a film crew attached. During the documentary, Simon crossed paths with a group of travellers who were undertaking a journey with Dragoman Overland, a pioneering company founded in 1981 by adventurers who started running trips across Africa and Asia in rugged off-road Mercedes trucks. Their ethos of small-group, self-sufficient travel appealed to me—wild camping, shared chores, and the camaraderie of fellow explorers getting off the beaten path.

After selling a house I was renting out—a remnant of my time working in London in a previous life—I suddenly had the funds and the time to fulfil my long-held dream, and I seized the opportunity: an overland odyssey from Kathmandu back to the UK, tracing fragments of the ancient Silk Road and hippie trails of the 1960s and '70s. It was a route fraught with geopolitical tensions, from Nepal's Maoist insurgency to the Middle East's complexities, but that only heightened the allure. This trip would test my limits, but it would be the encounters with diverse cultures and warm-hearted people that would make every challenge feel worthwhile.

Preparations were intense, with ten vaccinations spread over several months and visas chased across embassies, with my passport only being returned to me from the Iranians two days prior to departure. Then there was the challenge of choosing what to take; packing for the duration of the trip into a single backpack, taking into account the deserts of northern India and the Middle East, as well as the thick snow of eastern Turkey, wasn’t easy for someone not known for travelling light.

Flying into Kathmandu on 19 February 2005, I joined "Archie," our trusty Mercedes overland truck, and a band of like-minded adventurers for a 10,000-mile journey through 15 countries: Nepal, India, Iran, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, then retracing our steps back to Turkey and onto the UK via Bulgaria, Hungary, Austria, Germany, Belgium and France, finally arriving back home some four months later.

This trip would blend high adventure with the raw grit of overland life: interminable border delays that blurred the hours; haggling in a multitude of languages and currencies with hawkers who could smell a novice a mile off; toilet stops that were little more than a shovel and a prayer; and going days without a proper shower. We would also share every chore, cooking communal meals over crackling campfires; washing up beneath a ceiling of stars; digging Archie out of mud that swallowed wheels to the axles; adapting to conservative dress codes; and bracing for unfamiliar foods that occasionally caused a revolt in our stomachs. Yet in that shared hardship, I would forge bonds with a gloriously diverse group of travellers who became a family.

These trials would be the gateway to exhilarating highs. In Kathmandu, prayer flags snapped and fluttered against snow-capped Himalayan peaks as we wandered among sacred stupas; in the chaotic, captivating cities of Delhi and Mumbai, the air rang with rickshaw horns, throbbed with spice-laden markets, and tempted us at every corner with exotic street food. Further west we would lose ourselves in Iran's tiled mosques and Persian ruins; share strong black tea and hookah pipes in traditional tea houses; wander Palmyra's ancient streets that whisper of long-fallen empires; marvel at ancient Baalbek, then enjoy Beirut's vibrant Mediterranean pulse; watch Petra emerge from canyon walls; camp under star-drenched skies with Bedouin hosts in Wadi Rum; and sail the Nile past pharaonic temples while the pyramids stood guard outside Cairo. Above all though, it was the connections forged and the kindness received from people of every culture along the way that would weave this journey into a tapestry of unforgettable joy and discovery.

Two decades later, as I revisit these memories via old journals and photographs to write this book, they remain vivid—a testament to the adventure and experiences I had. With the ability to use modern tools such as Google Maps, advances in artificial intelligence, and the internet's unlimited knowledge at my fingertips, I can now relive this part of my story in a way that has not been possible until now. Writing this book also gives me the opportunity to reflect on how things have changed culturally, economically, and geopolitically for the people I met and the places I travelled through all those years ago, and I'm looking forward to seeing how the journey would differ today.

So, hop aboard, buckle up and let's hit the road… The journey west begins!

# Chapter 1
# Touchdown in Kathmandu

After all the preparation and waiting, I was finally here in Kathmandu, the start of my adventure. The flight had been a long overnight haul with Gulf Air, departing London Heathrow at half-past ten and arriving in Abu Dhabi around nine-thirty the next morning after seven hours in the air. The stopover was brief, with just an hour and a half to stretch my legs, grab a coffee, and marvel at the impressive terminal building before boarding my second Gulf Air flight of the day for the four-hour leg to Kathmandu, finally touching down at 5.05pm. The views were stunning as we approached Nepal; just before our descent, I caught my first glimpse of the mighty Himalayan range, its snow-capped peaks piercing the clouds like jagged sentinels guarding this ancient kingdom. We then dipped lower, flying below the summits of the hills that surround Nepal's capital, the city unfolding below in a patchwork of rooftops and valleys.

I didn't really know what to expect from Nepal, or for that matter, most of the countries I would be visiting on this adventure. I'd never ventured outside Western Europe, except for a brief weekend in New York and a beach holiday in the Dominican Republic, but none of those could have prepared me for the culture shock I was about to experience.

Tribhuvan International Airport felt modern, with well-dressed staff, plenty of space, and efficient paperwork that got me through immigration quickly. To make the journey as smooth as possible, I'd arranged a transfer from the airport to Hotel Garuda, which was located in the heart of Thamel, the tourist hub where I'd be staying. This efficient and calm start to my time in Nepal had lulled me into a false sense of security. As soon as I stepped into the arrivals lounge, I knew I was somewhere entirely different; I was instantly bombarded by about thirty people all vying to carry my luggage or offer me rides. I scanned the crowd for a sign with my name on, but there didn't seem to be any, and I started to feel a twinge of panic. A scruffy-looking local then approached and shoved a scrap of paper at me, my name scribbled on it in biro, only just legible. Unsure, but with few better options, I followed him out, fending off five more eager porters as we went, and climbed into the back of the oldest, rustiest car I'd ever seen. The driver tied the boot shut with a rope, securing my worldly possessions, and we were off!

The journey to the hotel only took about 25 minutes; it should have taken longer, but my driver clearly had somewhere else he needed to be, so he didn't hang about. The chaos of Kathmandu hit me straight between the eyes: the roads were bedlam, with horns blaring in a deafening symphony, the smell of diesel exhaust and street food choking the air, and a mass of people breathing in the thick fumes that hung over the area near the airport. But what struck me most was the poverty. Along some of the roughest roads, families lived right on the side of the main thoroughfare, cooking on open fires with little in the way of shelter, while naked kids played on mud verges as cars whizzed by, not a blade of grass in sight.

We screeched to a stop outside Hotel Garuda, a small, friendly two-star establishment in the tourist hub of the city, basic, but clean and nice enough for my needs for the next couple of days. I checked in and collapsed on my bed, relieved to have made it safe and sound. After a quick shower and change of clothes, I ventured out for a stroll around the neighbourhood to get a well-deserved drink and something to eat. On entering one of the first bars I came across, I turned my attention to the television: Arsenal versus Sheffield United in the FA Cup, Andy Gray scoring a penalty in the 90th minute to earn Sheffield a replay. Maybe I wasn't that far from home after all!

I woke around noon, feeling refreshed after a fantastic night's sleep, and set off for a walk around the city, eager to stretch my legs after the long flight the day before. I began by exploring Thamel, its streets lined with shops, bars, and restaurants catering to the tourists who come here to venture into the mountains, then headed down to Durbar Square, where I spent the rest of the day wandering the historic centre of old Kathmandu, its ancient royal temples and pagoda-inspired architecture being more to my taste. After a couple of hours, I began to relax and started to enjoy the city more, although I did get pestered frequently by locals trying to sell me tourist tat or offer their services as guides, which was a little annoying, but with a stern shake of the head, they tended to leave me to my own devices. It was also reassuring to see a few other Westerners among the crowds; maybe some would turn out to be my companions on this adventure?

At ten the following morning, I headed down to the hotel breakfast room to meet my fellow overlanders. There were nine of us in total, a mix of ages ranging from early twenties to late thirties: Mick (Irish) and Claire (English), who were the leader and co-driver; and the passengers: Joanna (English), Michael (Austrian), Valerie (American), Dave (American), Leslie and Bryan (a Canadian couple), and me. Joanna, Valerie, and Mick were the only ones doing the whole trip back to the UK with me. Everyone else, except Claire, would be leaving in Delhi, where we would pick up new recruits and then head to Mumbai. From there, Claire would bring Archie back to Kathmandu, and we would fly on to Tehran to meet a new co-driver and truck.

Originally, the itinerary had us staying with the same truck all the way back to the UK, driving through Pakistan into Iran. However, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office advised against all but essential travel to parts of Pakistan, particularly Balochistan and areas close to the Afghan border, due to a deteriorating security situation, with rising insurgency and a high threat of terrorism and kidnapping of foreigners. Overland companies were finding the route effectively uninsurable. This meant we would see a great deal more of India before the flight to Tehran. It would have been nice to complete the entire route overland, but this option opened up new sights to explore in India, a country I was keen to really get under the skin of, so I wasn’t too disappointed.

The final thing to organise was the kitty. The trip had been paid for prior to leaving the UK, but during the journey, each passenger contributed to a central kitty that covered the group's ongoing expenses, such as food, hotel stays, local guides, and museum entry. For this leg of the journey, the kitty was set at US$230 per person, which would cover all our daily needs (excluding alcohol) from Kathmandu through to Delhi. The kitty was managed by the passengers with just a little oversight from the tour leader. After our initial meeting, we had the rest of the day free to explore the city before leaving Kathmandu tomorrow morning.

Michael, Dave, Joanna, and I decided to share a taxi to Pashupatinath. Dating back to the fifth century AD, it’s one of the most sacred Hindu temple complexes in the world and a major pilgrimage site. The complex, dedicated to Lord Shiva as Pashupati, the ‘Lord of Animals’, sprawls along the banks of the holy Bagmati River, featuring over 500 temples, shrines, and ashrams built in intricate Newari style with tiered roofs and carved stone. We obtained the services of a guide, who was very helpful and informative, explaining the religion and history of the site. Guides were cheap; the one we had was with us for about an hour and a half and cost 50 NPR each (the equivalent of about 40p at the time). Large stone platforms known as ghats are used for open-air cremations, a ritual deeply rooted in Hindu beliefs that burning the body at this auspicious site helps liberate the soul to achieve moksha, or freedom from the cycle of rebirth. We watched solemnly as bodies, wrapped in white cloth and adorned with marigolds, were placed on pyres of stacked wood, before being set alight. Some had been burning for a while, their flames crackling against the ancient brick backdrops and arched gateways where little remained but ash. Families mourned nearby, some in red saris performing rituals on the terraced steps, while others bathed in the murky waters below for purification, blending the cycles of life, death, and devotion in a raw, poignant atmosphere. Smoke rose from multiple ghats, mingling with chants and the scent of sandalwood, while the river carried ashes downstream toward the Ganges.

From there, we walked for about thirty minutes to Boudhanath Stupa, one of the largest spherical stupas in the world, believed to date back to the sixth century or earlier, possibly enclosing relics of the Buddha himself. It's a

central hub for Tibetan Buddhism, especially since the influx of Tibetan refugees in the 1950s. The stupa is surrounded by monasteries, shops, and a circular walkway where pilgrims spin prayer wheels and chant mantras. The massive white dome, symbolising the structure of the universe, is topped by a golden spire painted with the all-seeing eyes of the Buddha, gazing compassionately in four directions, with colourful prayer flags radiating outward like vibrant threads carrying prayers on the wind. We saw workers harnessed with ropes climbing the tiered golden pinnacle, cleaning and re-applying the gold leaf to keep it gleaming under the morning sun. From the stupa's roof, we caught our first proper glimpse of the Himalayas, their distant snow-capped peaks rising majestically above the chaotic rooftops, which were dotted with black water tanks, satellite dishes, and more fluttering flags, creating a breathtaking contrast of ancient spirituality and modern urban sprawl.

Outside the stupa, we hailed another taxi and headed to Patan, also known as Lalitpur, with its own Durbar Square (there are three Durbar Squares in Kathmandu). This one was largely built during the Malla dynasty from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries and showcases Newari craftsmanship, with tiered pagoda temples, stone shikhara shrines, intricate wood carvings of gods and mythological figures, and palace courtyards that once housed kings. Today, the square hums with life: locals and tourists gather on the temple steps, vendors hawk their wares, and the occasional motorbike weaves around its edges, all framed by the distant Himalayas peeking through.

Before heading back to the hotel, we stopped for lunch at a local restaurant with a great rooftop garden overlooking the square, offering sweeping views of Kathmandu's rooftops and the ever-present Himalayas beyond. The food was very good; we had dal (a spiced lentil soup), vegetable curry, rice, and chapatti—pretty much the staple diet in Nepal and India, and what we would be eating for the next six weeks. Thankfully, I loved it! It was a perfect spot to stop, relax, and reflect on the day's explorations before we'd all reunite for a night out, first having something to eat at the Third Eye Restaurant in Thamel, before heading to Sam's Bar for several drinks to help break the ice. It was a great night and the perfect day to kick off the trip.

We were up early the following morning to meet Archie and leave Kathmandu, heading for Sauraha and the Royal Chitwan National Park. We hauled our bags a couple of blocks to a nearby car park, but there was no time for proper introductions as a large crowd had already gathered to admire him and see what all the fuss was about. This would be something we would have to get used to in both Nepal and India, as we seemed to attract attention wherever we went. We quickly loaded up, climbed aboard, and got underway.

Archie was custom-built on a Mercedes chassis, rugged and ready for any terrain. He had soft seats and several creature comforts: a fridge stocked with water and beer, a small library, fully opening windows, roof seats, plenty of storage for kitchen equipment and tents, and—oh yeah, nearly forgot—shit shovels! With everything we needed on board, Archie made us completely self-sufficient.

We pulled out of the car park and onto the road that would lead us out of the capital; the adventure was now truly underway.

## Chapter 2

# Roadblocks and Rhinos: Nepal's Wild Ride

As we pulled out of Kathmandu's bustling streets, the urban chaos began to fade, giving way to stunning countryside and deep valleys stretching south. The air grew fresher, the landscape more dramatic, with terraced fields clinging to hillsides like patchwork quilts and glimpses of distant peaks teasing the horizon. We were making good progress at first, but it wasn't long before we hit our first convoy, a stark reminder of Nepal's turbulent times.

The Maoist insurgency erupted in 1996 when the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) launched a "people's war" against the monarchy and government, demanding land reform, equality, and an end to corruption. By 2005, the conflict had claimed over 13,000 lives, with rebels controlling much of the rural countryside and ambushing roads to disrupt supply lines. Just weeks before our trip, on 1 February, King Gyanendra seized absolute power in a controversial coup, declaring a state of emergency amid the chaos. As a result, the roads were unsafe to be travelled alone, so all traffic had to be escorted by the military in convoys, queuing up with hundreds of other vehicles, sometimes as many as 500, and moving together under army protection. We'd only get as far as the next major crossroads before stopping again, waiting for enough traffic to justify the military's next move. It was frustrating but necessary, as the rebels often targeted roads, planting landmines or ambushing convoys to disrupt the government. Our first forced stop lasted four hours before we could progress in the convoy.

About 100km outside Kathmandu, we encountered a grim sight: around 15 trucks pulled off the side of the road, burnt out and still smouldering. The Maoists had shot out their tyres and set them ablaze. Several vehicles had been carrying water buffalo, leaving half-charred carcasses scattered amid the wreckage, a haunting testament to the violence. The next day's newspaper reported a similar incident, where, on 20 February, in Sindhupalchowk district, Maoist rebels ambushed an army-escorted convoy of trucks and buses, intending to target military vehicles but striking a civilian bus instead, resulting in one civilian death and seven injuries. Stories like this were all too common, underscoring the human cost of the war.

We hit several roadblocks along the way, each adding to the delays. Archie was more than comfortable and was our temporary home from home, so the delays, although frustrating, were not too tedious. The time gave us a chance to start getting to know one another; there was plenty of room and several tables where seats faced each other, so we utilised the space to play some cards (Texas Hold'em being the game of choice for the duration of the trip), listen to music, and enjoy the experience of finally being underway.

In general, the condition of the roads seemed OK, but one twenty-five-mile stretch was appalling, being untarmacked and riddled with potholes that jolted us relentlessly, even in Archie's sturdy frame. It tested our endurance, but the scenery made up for it with lush green valleys, rushing rivers, and occasional villages where life seemed untouched by the conflict. Another striking image was the riverbeds below the road, where makeshift camps of blue tarps dotted the dry gravel beds, home to families scraping by through sand and gravel mining. This informal work, common in the Terai lowlands and hills en route to Chitwan, involved sifting riverbeds by hand for construction materials, a vital but gruelling livelihood for the poor, often unregulated and environmentally harsh, with workers living in temporary settlements amid the dust and isolation.

After eleven and a half hours, we reached Narayanghat, the gateway to Chitwan, but the police wouldn't let us pass. Sauraha, our destination, was just thirty minutes away, tantalisingly close. Mick worked his magic, finding

a local who made some calls on our behalf, and we were finally waved through. We arrived at Rhino Lodge around eight-thirty, after a twelve-and-a-half-hour drive that would have taken three to four without the convoys. Exhausted but exhilarated, we settled in for the night.

Rhino Lodge was perched right on the edge of the Rapti River, directly opposite the Royal Chitwan National Park. Established in 1973 to protect the Terai region's rich biodiversity, it was Nepal's first national park and was granted UNESCO World Heritage status in 1984. Spanning approximately 360 square miles, it's home to endangered species such as the greater one-horned rhinoceros, Bengal tigers, and Asian elephants, with diverse ecosystems ranging from sal forests to grasslands and riverine habitats. In 2005, it was a beacon of conservation amid the country's unrest.

We woke early to catch the sunrise, its golden light painting the river and revealing the park's beauty across the water, something we hadn't seen the night before as it was dark when we arrived. After breakfast, we headed to the riverbank, where guides took us downstream in two dugout canoes for a thirty-minute tour, the gentle current carrying us through misty morning air. Along the banks, we spotted a couple of gharials, long-snouted crocodiles, basking in the sun, their slender jaws distinctive, along with a variety of birds like kingfishers and egrets. The serene glide was a peaceful contrast to yesterday's chaos.

Disembarking the canoes, we began a guided trek back to the lodge through the jungle. Our guide pointed out tracks, with deep impressions from rhinos, elephant footprints that looked like massive craters, deer slots, and even the faint paw prints of a tiger. We saw plenty more birds, vibrant hornbills and peafowls, and troops of monkeys swinging through the canopy, chattering noisily. No big game sightings yet, but the anticipation built with every rustle in the undergrowth.

Once back at the lodge, we enjoyed some chill-out time, gearing up for an unforgettable morning bathing elephants. Two majestic Asian elephants were brought to the lodge, and we were given instructions on how to climb onto their bare backs by grabbing their ears for leverage and standing on their trunks as they lifted us up over their heads in a thrilling hoist. Feeling the rough, warm skin beneath us, we rode down to the river and into the water. For the next twenty minutes, we scrubbed them with brushes, splashing water over their massive frames while they playfully sprayed us back, dunked us, and threw us off. Laughter echoed across the river; it was pure joy.

After lunch, we ventured into the park proper, atop the remarkably clean elephants, for a safari. Divided into groups of four, we didn't go bareback this time but instead sat in the much softer howdah, the traditional saddle, where we each straddled a corner post with our legs dangling down, while the mahout sat up front on the elephant's neck, steering with his feet and a small stick. We lumbered off into the jungle, the rhythmic sway high above the tall grass offering us a unique vantage point. About twenty minutes in, we encountered three one-horned rhinos grazing peacefully. Our elephants approached within a couple of feet, close enough to hear their heavy breathing and see the texture of their armoured hides. Rhinos have poor eyesight and rely on smell, so they detected only the elephants, not us humans perched high above the ground, allowing this intimate encounter without startling them.

No tiger sightings that day, but we managed to trick Mick, our tour leader, who hadn't joined the safari as he had other things to attend to, but he was really keen to see a tiger in the wild. At the park's visitor centre, there were photos of tigers on display, and I managed to zoom in with my camera to make it look like we'd seen one during our ride. We kept this pretence up all the way to India's Ranthambore National Park, which was our next, and last chance to see one.

That evening, a local Tharu tribe, the indigenous people of the Terai lowlands, known for their unique stick dances, malaria resistance, and livelihoods in fishing, farming, and weaving, visited the lodge in traditional attire to perform energetic dances for us. Their rhythms, accompanied by drums and flutes, told stories of harvest and nature, with men wielding sticks in mock battles that symbolised community strength. Before long, we were

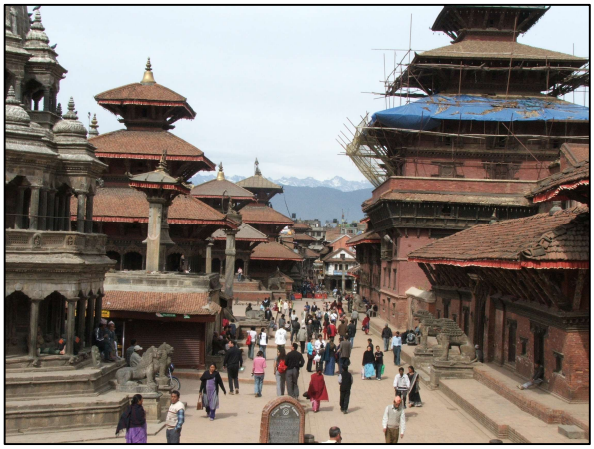
dragged onto the "dance floor," learning the steps and joining in with as much enthusiasm as they had, just with a lot less skill. We capped the best day yet with beers around a campfire, sharing stories as the group continued to bond.

Thursday, 24 February, saw us depart Rhino Lodge around eight for the 130-mile push to India, hoping for smoother sailing than the inbound leg. No such luck though; after just five miles, we hit our first convoy. News had also just broken two days previously that since the coup on 1 February, India and the UK had withdrawn military aid from Nepal, including arms supplies and assistance, citing concerns over the political situation and human rights abuses, heightening tensions for all parties.

We pressed on, and just after lunch joined another queue, settling in for a long wait. After about ninety minutes, two military helicopters thundered overhead towards the hills a mile ahead, where machine-gun fire suddenly erupted, followed by explosions. With our hearts pounding, expecting the worst, we were ordered into Archie for safety. Only five minutes later though, the military waved the convoy through, but with Archie sandwiched between petrol tankers, this was a tense moment, one stray bullet and I felt we would all be toast! We drove right past the skirmish site, soldiers patrolling with guns slung over their shoulders, the air thick with unease. As we drove on, we passed about a hundred Nepalese troops marching back along the road into town. Thankfully, we cleared the hills without incident, breathing a collective sigh of relief.

After another twelve-hour day on the road, we reached the Sonauli border crossing, where we stopped for our last Nepalese meal before crossing into India, and adding another stamp to our passports. The meal, at a roadside dhaba, was simple but tasty. Dhabas are basic eateries, commonly found along highways and major roads in southern Nepal and India, serving authentic, hearty, and affordable food, often catering to travellers, truck drivers, and locals. They typically offer traditional dishes like dal, roti, naan, paratha, tandoori items, and various curries, which we would be trying regularly as we travelled India’s vast road network.

Nepal had been a fantastic start, a shock to the system with regard to the ongoing conflict and the poverty we’d witnessed, but the warmth and friendliness of the people, wildlife, historical sites, and the stunning scenery had made this first step into the unknown a joy, and had met my initial test of what I had been looking for—an adventure that would excite and challenge me.



Architecture of old Kathmandu

Cremation Ghat at Pashupatinath

Pashupatinath by the Bagmati River

Boudhanath Stupa

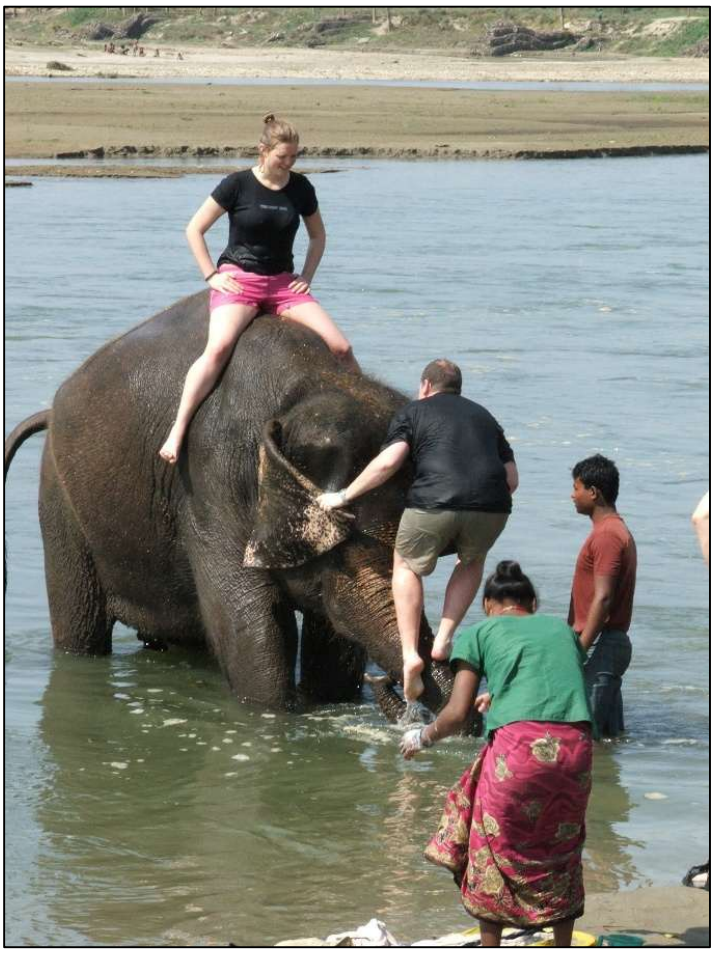
Our first sight of the mighty Himalayas

Gravel workers on the way to Chitwan

Joy from Michael as the convoy is given the go ahead to move

One of the many roadblocks we came across

Early morning canoe ride on the Rapti River



Me attempting the mounting procedure

Washing the elephants was a highlight of our Nepal adventure

More queuing at roadblocks


Joanna and Dave on Archie's roof seats, still waiting.....

# Chapter 3
# Nepal, Two Decades On

Twenty years on, the culture shock I first experienced after leaving Tribhuvan Airport and being driven into the heart of Kathmandu—along with the excitement of meeting my fellow travellers—is still fresh in my memory. The highlights of this first country on my odyssey remain vivid: the architecture of the capital, the Maoist convoys and those first days getting to know Archie, rattling along towards Chitwan, and the magical bareback ride on the elephants as they swayed calmly into the Rapti River for their morning bath. Reflecting now on Nepal's transformation since those tense days adds a profound new layer to those memories.

The Maoist conflict, which began in 1996 as a rural uprising against inequality and the monarchy, had scarred the nation by the time I visited, with rebels controlling swathes of territory and King Gyanendra's recent power grab only fuelling the fire. Yet the civil war would end in a surprising resolution: a 2006 comprehensive peace accord that disarmed the Maoists, integrated them into mainstream politics, and ultimately led to the abolition of the monarchy in 2008. This gave rise to a federal republic that formally transitioned into a multiparty democracy under the 2015 constitution. Nepal has achieved relative peace since the accord, with no major armed conflicts; however, political volatility lingers with frequent government changes (16 prime ministers since 2008) and ongoing youth-led protests.

Economically, Nepal is no longer scraping the bottom of the global barrel. At the time of my visit in 2005, GDP per capita was around £155, placing the country 166 out of the 184 economies measured in the IMF's World Economic Outlook. This has now risen substantially to about £1,200 in 2025, lifting Nepal to 113 out of the 190 measured. This increase is fuelled by remittances (which make up nearly 30% of GDP) wired home by workers in places such as Dubai and Doha, the tourism industry's rebound to pre-COVID levels (with 1.15 million visitors in 2025), and growth in hydropower and agriculture.

Average annual wages also tell a tale of progress for Nepal's 30 million inhabitants. In 2005, the International Labour Organisation estimated the national average at roughly £130, a figure heavily skewed towards rural day-labourers like those riverbed gravel-sifters we passed on the way to Chitwan, who were lucky to reach £90 a year for their back-breaking labour, while workers in Kathmandu scraped closer to £217 annually, still barely enough to cover dal and rice beneath the stupas. By 2025, it's ballooned to roughly £2,700, with urban professionals in Thamel's trek outfits or Patan's artisan stalls now averaging £3,600 or more yearly, although rural Terai villagers still lag behind at £1,200-£1,500. That's a nominal 1,150% leap, or a 6-7% compound annual growth rate after being adjusted for inflation.

Large inequalities persist though. In 2025, the national minimum wage was increased to approximately £1,200 annually, yet informal workers (who make up roughly 70% of the workforce) often earn far less for irregular daily labour. This inequality has led to an urban pull to the cities in a bid to seek higher wages and a better standard of living, causing Kathmandu's population to swell from around 790,000 in 2005 to approximately 1.67 million today.

Chitwan National Park (now dropping the 'Royal' moniker after the abolition) has fared well, with visitor numbers steadily rising from 100,000 in 2005 to more than 230,000 annually for 2024/2025. Google Maps images of the hotels serving these increased numbers reveal a destination that has received significant investment, now offering far more luxurious accommodation and amenities than I remember enjoying two decades ago. Wildlife

conservation has been a genuine success story, with one-horned rhino numbers increasing from 372 in 2005 to 694 by 2022 (the last year numbers were measured), thanks in part to anti-poaching patrols and strong community support. Bengal tiger numbers have also risen dramatically, from 49 to 128 over the same period. Forty-nine in 360 square miles—no wonder we didn't see any!

Natural disasters have also shaped Nepal's path, with the devastating 7.8 magnitude Gorkha earthquake hitting the country in 2015, killing nearly 9,000 people and injuring a further 22,000. It also destroyed several heritage sites, including the spire of Boudhanath Stupa, which collapsed but was fully rebuilt the following year through private donations and community support. Patan Durbar Square suffered severe damage, with several temples such as Char Narayan Mandir collapsing to their plinths, while others, such as Krishna Mandir, cracked but survived. Pashupatinath's main temple endured with minor cracks, but 71 surrounding heritage sites were badly damaged. These have also now been restored, with smoke once again rising from the ghats in front of the rebuilt shrines. Thamel, being more modern, was largely spared structural damage but saw tourism numbers plummet temporarily. Nepal's recovery and adaptation from this disaster highlight how far it has progressed from the fragile state I experienced.

Overall, although still a poor country, Nepal is in much better shape, peaceful on the surface, with a vibrant democracy, economic growth averaging 4-5% annually in recent years, and improved infrastructure, including expanded roads and electricity access reaching 94% of households by 2023. Challenges still persist though, including high youth unemployment (20.8% for ages 15-24), climate vulnerabilities such as floods and earthquakes that continue to cause issues, and ongoing political gridlock that hampers reforms.

The spirit of resilience I witnessed amid the convoys and conflict has endured, evolving into a nation now striving for prosperity.