

Journey to the Land of Snows

Carole Loveridge

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A trip to the Himalayas was something I had always wanted to do, but of course when you are younger there are children and/or work which make it difficult; now of course the children have flown and work is a thing of the past---my time is my own. So, together with my friend, another Carole, a trip was planned.

We had both been to China in 1991, just after the Tiananmen Square incident, when we were unable to see or do some of the things that had been on our itinerary, so we decided to go back to Shanghai and address that by starting our trek there.

We arranged the trip as best we could on the Internet, booking flights and a couple of hostels, because we would be arriving in some places at a late hour loaded with a backpack when finding accommodation would be difficult. There were also the visas to arrange for entering China; whilst surfing the web for information on the countries we would travel through we found that a Chinese visa would also cover us for Tibet. When we cross from Tibet into Nepal we could buy our visa for Nepal at the border crossing; our problem was going to be getting into Tibet from China.

The Chinese do not make it easy for foreigners to travel there, besides visas we would need various permits to board a plane, a train or a bus and also to travel into remote areas. All of the permits and travel arrangements had to be made through a tour operator which was best arranged from Chengdu that is situated in the west of China and is a gateway into Tibet.

All these things were fluid and could change at the whim of the Chinese but undeterred we flew out to Shanghai on September 1st arriving around 8.30 a.m. on September 2nd. The flight had taken eleven and half hours; Pudong airport was quiet compared to Heathrow and after filling out health declarations forms confirming we had not been in contact with swine flu we collected our bags and headed for the Maglev, this is the Chinese answer to the bullet train. We managed to find our way to the station, which is within the airport area, and bought our tickets.

The train is fantastic, squeaky clean and comfortable, it travels at 300 kilometres per hour that is about 100 miles an hour, we leaned and curved as if on a motorbike. The Maglev terminates at the metro station and we now have to find the train to the People's Square. This was a little tricky making sure we had the right train; fortunately the computerised destination information on the train was in English as well as Chinese.

When we arrived the humid air hit us as we walked out from the station into the manic streets of Shanghai city. To cross the streets we used the flyovers from which we could see the four/five lane traffic flowing in both directions and we could see the pollution hanging in the air. Our hostel was about a 10-minute walk from the station and we found it without any hassle.

After a shower we headed out to investigate our surroundings and find a restaurant; Chinese hotpot, not recommended. Although the restaurant was typically Chinese and a little up market it did not bear any relationship to our Chinese restaurant and served very different food. We then headed back to our hostel both feeling very tired; we had not slept much on the plane and had now been awake for some 16 to 20 hours.



For the next three days we found our way around Shanghai, sometimes re-visiting sights like the Yuan Gardens and the Bund; we took a river trip up the famous Yangtze that we had not been allowed to do previously. We visited the famous Jin Mao Tower, once the tallest building in Shanghai but now overtaken by many fabulous buildings. The Jin Mao has a viewing floor on level 86 and we watched the lights of Shanghai come on as dusk fell. We found some westernised restaurants but we had to pay more in these, interestingly they were packed with affluent Chinese. Shanghai is really a city of two halves, in the financial area and in the newer parts of the city are the huge and magnificent buildings covered in lights at night. But turn the corner into the older section and behind the

old colonial type buildings you find the poorer section where the little Chinese man sits on the edge of the road mending pushbikes or polishing the 'oh so' expensive shoes of his better off countrymen. There does not appear to be any in between in Shanghai, only haves and have-nots.

Our three days in Shanghai pass in a blink and on the morning of the fourth day we fly to Chengdu.

It is Sunday morning as we are driven through the streets of Shanghai back to the airport for our flight to Chengdu; it felt a little like the dodgems at speed. With his hand constantly on the horn our little taxi man careered through the amazingly busy streets, narrowly missing all that came close to his path. Once outside the city limits it was calmer and I was able to relax my grip on the seat in front of me; it was just a short flight of two hours.

Chengdu is a huge city rivalling London in size, the pollution here is a problem, and even some of the locals wear facemasks. Our main aim whilst in this city is to book seats on the Qinghai-Tibet Train. This train runs on the worlds' highest railway, its highest point is 5,072 metres; the track is set on permafrost which has a cooling system of pipes driven into the ground to keep it frozen all the year round thus preventing the rails from buckling in the summer.

The train is highly controversial; it arrives in Lhasa full with Chinese tourists and immigrants, they are given cheap fares to Tibet in order to settle in the province, the train returns to Mainland China only half-full. It runs daily and carries around 2,500 people, the largest percentage being Chinese, as we were to find out. We were booked into another hostel, one we had arranged on the Internet. It was a lovely hostel and their attempts at European cuisine were adequate if a little limited.

In order to book seats on the Qinghai-Tibet Train it was necessary to go through an agency and to travel in Tibet you need many permits, even more if you wish to venture into the Tibetan Autonomous Region. (T.A.R.) area. We were fortunate to meet a Dutch couple that wanted to do much the same as ourselves when in Tibet, this meant we were able to share the costs. You are not allowed to travel unescorted in Tibet we therefore had to hire a four-wheel drive vehicle with driver plus a guide. An itinerary has to be set, from which you must not deviate, this takes two days to organise, plus booking the train and the tour; all mostly due to the complications and difficulties the Chinese make for foreign travellers into Tibet.

However, we cannot leave until the 19th September, this means we have to spend a further ten days here; and we realise that, because of this delay, our Chinese visa will run out before we can leave Tibet. So, we decide to head off to Kangdin where we are assured we can extend our visas, there is a local bus service that leaves early in the morning, it will get us there but will be a full days travel. It was hard to get understood at the bus terminus and we had to enlist the help of a young girl. We had gone prepared with fruit and biscuits in case there was not an opportunity to eat en route.

The bus was full and we were the only tourists on board. Cramped in a seat at the back of the bus with our day sacks between our legs there was little room to move. The Chinese are loud and although they appear not to have a great deal of money the younger element are very proud of their mobile phones, phoning one another across the aisle and having loud conversations which could easily have been had without the use of the phone. The ride was rough and very hot. There was no air conditioning and only one or two windows that opened down towards the front of the bus.

Two hours into our journey we pull into a pot-holed yard with a dilapidated building, the driver gives instructions to his very young right-hand man and heads for the building. There is a mass exodus off the bus and most of the young disappear behind the building to relieve themselves. The few women head toward a small out-building where an old Chinese lady stands with her hand out for your money before allowing you to use her hole in the ground. We are forced to use this amenity, as we have no idea when we will stop again. There are two holes in the ground, side by side, you squat next to your neighbour and there is no door to the outside world, and of course no running water.

Fortunately we never travelled without our precious toilet rolls and hand wipes, both of which were always needed. As we left the old lady gave us a smile showing us a single tooth in an otherwise gummy mouth. She was obviously proud of her facilities. We waited outside the bus for our driver to return, he was, we found having breakfast. The bus took on water to cool a very hot engine, I guess. Back on the bus we travelled on stopping one more time for a pee at the side of the road.

At 5.p.m. we arrive in Kangdin, three young Chinese take us under their wing and help us to find accommodation and a meal that night, both of which were pretty grim. Kangdin did not impress us, so because it was a weekend and we could not get our visas until the Monday we caught another bus to Danba the next morning; it is nearer to Tibet and to get there we travelled through the mountains, quite literally. There was a network of tunnels that the Chinese had built, quite an engineering feat; when exiting we had to leave the bus and walk over a bridge, which obviously would not take the laden bus's weight.

Upon reaching the other side there was a new bus and driver waiting to continue the journey. The roads are rarely paved and are frequently awash with water that has cascaded down the side of the mountain, it crosses the road to fall into the raging river flowing below us on the other side; we are at an altitude of around 3,000 metres and the scenery is spectacular. Danba is hot and we are faced with a difficulty of being understood, the further you travel from main cities you see fewer Europeans and fewer Chinese who might speak any English.

A hotel is found, I use the term loosely, the toilet is a usual squat type and the shower is not always hot, but it is clean so that is a bonus, and as the weather is hot then a cool shower is fine. We trek around Danba over the weekend but it is very hot and humid, each afternoon a wind whips up and the sand blasts your skin.

Our bus back to Kangdin leaves at 6.30 a.m. and we travel back over the route we had taken a day or so earlier. On arrival in Kangding we have to find the P.S.B. where we get our visa extensions, the young Chinese that had helped us when we first arrived had written in Chinese the questions we would need to ask to get to the P.S.B. But unless you struck lucky and asked an educated Chinese there was a lot of shrugging of the shoulders; eventually a young policeman was able to help. There was a lot of form filling and we had to get money from an ATM before they could process our applications. The first bank we came to was the Agricultural Bank, from the outside there did not appear to be many people in the bank, but it did have two ATM's on the outside.

When you use these ATM's abroad they ask which language you prefer to use before proceeding with the transaction, I made two attempts at extracting money and in both instances I was told to contact my card provider. This was not good news, I did not want to try again and have my card gobbled up so my friend Carole tried her card, it was a different provider, and maybe she could get money.

Again after two attempts we had no money and as a result could not get new visas if we could not get any money. We were getting worried when from within the bank ran a small Chinese man waving his hands and shouting at us "bank, no money". Just great I thought, just like a pub with no beer. The little man was very apologetic and escorted us up the street to a bank that did have beer; sorry, I mean money.

The P.S.B. took our money and copies of our documents and said come back tomorrow for your visas, so one more night in Kangdin then back to Chengdu and our train journey into Tibet.

On arriving back in Chengdu we met up with our Dutch friends and had a meal of noodles and meat before heading to the train station that is packed with folk sitting on the ground. We are kept hanging around for over a hour before we are checked and re-checked then herded onto the train, it is so long I cannot see its end. Our hard sleepers are fine with soft pillows and thick duvets. You can buy food on the train we had our own rations, not knowing what could be on offer in the food line. There is piped oxygen for later on when we are at altitude and the lights go off at ten---this will be home for the next 48 hours.

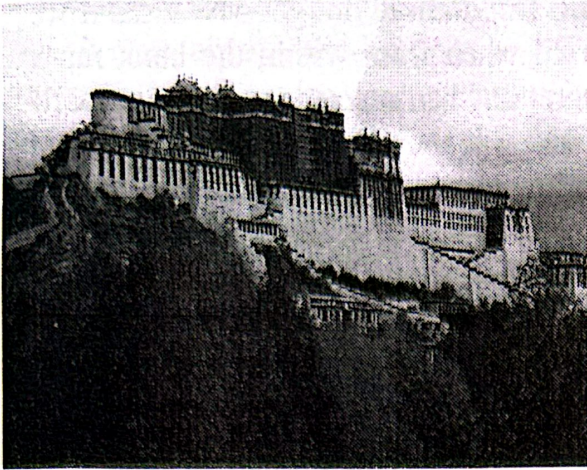
If I am honest, the next two days spent on the train were a little boring; we got off at each stop the train made (about two) to stretch our legs, otherwise it is a walk through the corridors to see the 1st class passengers (mostly Chinese) accommodation. As we start to climb the scenery becomes less attractive, brown and barren looking mountains and very few townships or villages; it has started to get colder too and we need our extra layers and on the 2nd day we descend toward Lhasa. The scenery changes and becomes greener with snow-capped mountains and lakes of the most amazing blue. Around 4 p.m. we pull into Lhasa station, it is incredibly large and the thousands of travellers that get off the train seem somewhat lost in it but then it is only our train that this enormous building services.



Lake Yamdrok-tso

Outside we find our guide (Jigmas) he walks us to our four-wheel vehicle complete with our driver and takes us to our hotel. There is a huge military presence and we are told not to take photographs of them or talk of political issues in public as both Jigmas and our driver could be imprisoned because of it. Our hotel is good, clean and for the first time in the last 48 hours we have a proper sit down toilet.

The next two or three days are spent in and around Lhasa one of the world's highest cities, our guide has arranged visits to all the places of interest, complete with all the necessary permits (sometimes more than one) plus tickets which we quickly realise are expensive for all the foreigners, but the Chinese get in free and of course they do not require permits or visas.



The Potala (once home of Dalai Lama)

The pilgrims will travel hundreds of miles constantly prostrating themselves among the glowing shrines and leave their offerings of yak butter and money. There is a constant murmur of 'on mani padme hum' ('hail to the jewel in the lotus').



Sadly, since the Chinese takeover Tibetans are outnumbered in this city 2:1 by the Chinese residents. The village that once lay at the foot of the Potala has disappeared and has been replaced by a Tiananmen style public square complete with a large monument commemorating the 'liberation,' this is under constant guard to prevent vandalism. There is a Tibetan quarter, it equates to around 4% of the Lhasa area, the city has changed more in the last 20 years than in the previous thousand.

Our days here are pretty regimented, most of the time we are escorted only being left to our own devices in the evenings. I struggled initially with the altitude, minor headaches, lack of appetite and an inability to move at any pace, all the classic signs of altitude sickness. But at the end of our first five days here I feel fine but our journey will soon head off into the mountains with about another 2,000 metres increase in altitude. We make an excursion out of Lhasa to see the Yamalung Hermitage taking our overnight bags, as the distance is too great to return in one day. The journey takes us through the Yorlung valley with its spectacular scenery where we stop at high points, which are always festooned with prayer flags, in order to take photographs.

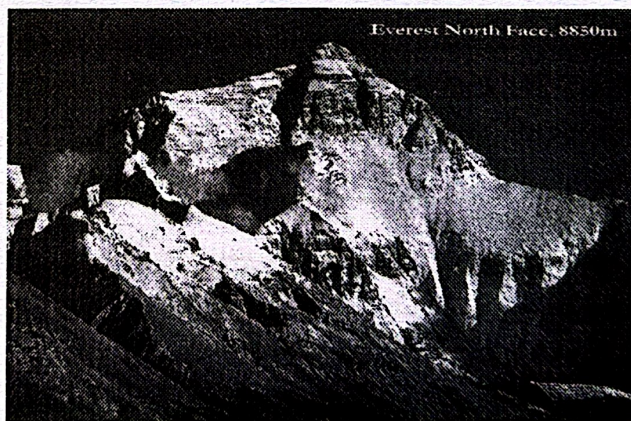
On our return to Lhasa we are told that we will now have a new guide, Jigmas has to take exams and we have a young girl to guide us from now on, also there is a problem with our travel schedule.

We were due to arrive at Everest Base Camp on 1st October, but the Chinese were having a holiday to celebrate 60 years of communism and intended to close all borders, monasteries, temples and palaces from the 1st for maybe a week, maybe more or less, nobody knows. Everest Base Camp was one of the highlights of this tour for me and I was not about to miss out so we brought forward our visit to the 30th September and lose a day elsewhere to accommodate it.

With our new schedule agreed we headed off into the mountains, this for me was the best. Although we were at altitude and had to take things slowly, the scenery was wonderful, passing the most amazing turquoise lake with snow capped mountains reflected in it—picture postcard stuff. Most of the roads are dirt tracks or dry riverbeds so we were rocked around quite a lot but it was well worth the discomfort. For four days we travelled and climbed through the mountains, visiting various monasteries along the way.

On the morning of the 30th September we had to make an early start from our guesthouse to reach the Everest Base Camp. Late morning we were told cloud can come down and obscure the view of Qomolangma, Tibet's name for Everest; We are wearing our thermals and plenty of layers which was just as well because the weather deteriorated with snow falling heavily making even our four wheel drive slip and slide. It took until 1.p.m. to get to tent camp, this is as far as vehicles can go, and the Everest Base camp is about another hours walk. Because of the lateness my friend Carole and I take the bus, yes believe it or not, there is a bus that will take you to the camp. Again when we arrive at Base Camp our guide pays an entrance fee and has to show our relevant permits before we are allowed to take photos.

The sky is postcard blue and Everest North Face gleams with the sun bouncing off the snow, an awesome sight. Apart from travellers and the ever present garrison of heavily armed Chinese forces there is little else at the Everest Base Camp on the Tibetan side, a far cry I believe to that on the Nepal side where there are medics and hospital tents which help mountaineers and sightseers who



have altitude sickness. Had any of us been unfortunate to suffer with this it would have meant a rapid descent to a lower altitude and a visit to the nearest hospital, this was several hundred kilometres away.

Our accommodation that night was in a yak tent back in the tent camp, a central fire kept burning by dried yak dung, our Tibetan hosts cooked our tea on it. Our beds, which functioned as seats during the day, were cosy and warm; the toilets were holes in the ground some 30 to 40 metres away. Things were very basic but it was just for one night, tomorrow we were leaving and heading for the Nepal border.

October 1st— leaving tent camp and the bitter cold weather we head towards the Nepal border; our journey takes us through some of the most barren that I have seen. The going is tortuous, dirt tracks, rocks and dry riverbeds all giving us the best shake-up of our lives. We stop for lunch in Old Tingri, there was little to see so after our meal we head on to Zhangmu. The travelling becomes easier as we are back on the Friendship Highway; the scenery starts to become more green and beautiful as we drop down in altitude.

Zhangmu is a border town with a constant change of travellers passing through, there is one very narrow main road through the town that drops down in a series of hair-pin bends to the customs area at the border of China and Nepal. This road constantly backs up with a never-ending queue of trucks and four-wheel drives heading down to the border, as we were to find out the following morning.

We arrived late afternoon in Zhangmu, just enough time to change Chinese yuan into Nepal rupees and find somewhere to eat; our guesthouse was damp and grim but again it was just one night. We gave our bags a quick check although they have been rarely out of our sight and then always locked, but one does not want to fall foul of the Chinese at the border. The Chinese authorities are hard at the best of times, darn right vicious if you are found breaking their laws and no amount of pleading ignorance of how a certain substance was found in your pack will appease.

After breakfast we headed for the border, inching down this very steep and narrow road, we quickly came to the end of the queue then had to walk the last 200-300 metres; there were hundreds of people waiting for the crossing to open.

It takes an hour to get through the searches and checks, you then walk across the river bridge into Nepal; there was just a handful of Tibetan/Chinese walking in the opposite direction, presumably they had bought provisions in Nepal. We now had to buy our Nepal visa that we needed in order to stay in the country, the Nepal immigration building was bulging at the seams with fellow travellers all wanting to do the same.

There were just three Nepalese gents handling this flow of folk and their boss was sat in an office on his own in his Sunday best suit, collar and tie and shoes that you could see your face in. There was no organisation at all, that is not a criticism that is how it is in remote areas, the Nepalese lack these skills and that is how it would be for the next three weeks. With our visas for thirty days we climbed aboard one of the many buses that were waiting to take a new influx of travellers to Kathmandu.

Kadari was the name of the little ram-shackle town on the Nepal side of the border and whilst we sat in a very overcrowded and stuffed to the gunnels bus waiting for our journey to Kathmandu, we realised the terrible conditions these folk live in. Shacks on the side of the track house families who scratch a living trying to sell to the never-ending stream of travellers passing through, people do not want to stay in Kadan.

We have changed our watches to reflect the odd two and half hours behind Chinese time and we hope to arrive in Kathmandu around teatime, about a 6-hour journey. Although the bus is packed we make stops at each village and more people are packed into the bus with their trappings, milk churns, chickens squashed in baskets and bundles of blankets or sacks with vegetables. The bus creaks along the winding dirt track road following the river down through a gorge, at times we have to pass other vehicles, mostly lorries heading back up the gorge.

Whilst waiting to thread our way through one village I catch sight of a young child, no more than eight, maybe nine, she is busy giving herself a wash from a standpipe that is on the side of the road. Given that we are still at around 2,500 metres and the water is running straight off the mountain, it must have been ice cold. She is wringing out her long black hair and catches sight of me watching her from the bus, her face breaks into a magnificent smile and she waves her hand at me, I wave back and think of how blessed and lucky my own grandchildren are.

It is about 5 o'clock when we reach the outskirts of Kathmandu, together with our Dutch friends we squeeze into a taxi which takes us to the Thamel area of the city; this is the tourist area with loads of guesthouses and hotels and we find rooms without too much difficulty. After our last few days we find the hot shower and sit down toilet quite luxurious. My appetite has started to return and there is a variety of different cuisine restaurants to choose from, so after a delicious curry washed down with a beer and coffee we head back to our rooms and much needed comfy beds after a long, tiring and extremely uncomfortable bus ride.

The next morning we find a little guy along the street who will do our laundry for just a few rupees, we can collect the following day, all washed, dried and ironed. He also sells us a second-hand Lonely Planet book of Nepal, we will need this to help find our way around as we both need to leave the manic bustle of Kathmandu and search out some more peaceful locations in which to spend our last days.

We chose Pokahara; my friend Carole remembers it from her visit in the seventies, a small village by a lake. After the weekend of wandering around the sights of Kathmandu on the Monday morning we catch yet another bus to Pokahara, this means another early rise as the bus leaves at 7.00 a.m. This time we take a tourist bus, there is a little more luxury—the windows open--- it may not seem much but as the day wears on it gets quite warm and very stuffy. The journey is fairly uneventful, just a lunch stop where we pull into the side of a roadside café serving an array of curry based dishes, tea, and coffee. We had not bargained for this as we had brought our own lunch, having travelled on local buses there are no luxuries like restaurants only stops on the roadside for a pee in the bushes.

It is late afternoon and raining, although very humid when we arrive in Pokahara, so armed with a couple of hotel names chosen from the Lonely Planet we ask a taxi driver to take us to the first. A quick look tells us this is too far out from town and we settle for our next choice, it is getting late in the day.

The following morning we head out for breakfast kitted in our wet weather gear, there was quite a thunderstorm in the night and the rain continues. We check out some hotels, ours was not the best and find another that is close to the lake. After moving our gear I invest in a brolly to keep the worst of the rain off.

Our next three days are rained off, keeping us in the hotel with frequent cuts to the electric supply, it is solar panels and it has been a while since we have seen the sun.

On the Friday the sun wakes us and its gloriously warm, we visit the peace pagoda which is a boat ride across the Phewa lake and a steep climb through a wooded area to the pagoda which looks out over Pokahara and the Annapurna mountain range. It is only then that Carole realises how huge Pokahara has grown, it is now a Mecca for mountaineers, trekkers, adventure sports of every kind you care to mention. Agencies in the main street will arrange just about anything you might want to do.

The next week is spent walking in and around Pokahara, taking in the sunrise on the Annapurnas, visiting other lakes and water falls and when we tire of that relaxing by a nearby hotel' outdoor swimming pool and taking a cool dip now and then. We enjoy this relaxed freedom of choice and movement; it is not what we have had whilst travelling through Tibet. After some days here we start to become recognised and feel at home, we met some amazing people here; a retired Australian doctor trying to set up centres where people can have their hearing tested. There is only one hospital and one consultant in the whole of Nepal, hence many people suffering from deafness and all that that can mean never to get diagnosed or treated. There are numerous voluntary workers all giving their time and money to help this very poor country, and yet some of these families do make a success of some enterprise, but a lot of restaurants and hotels are owned and run by foreigners---German, Dutch, French---employing locals.

There are Tibetan refugee villages that are home for the few that escape from Tibet, you meet many of these folk sat by the roadside peddling the hand made jewellery or bags that they have made, being constantly moved on by the police. They beg for any clothes or items that we discard and not willing to carry home. For our last two or three days we head back into Kathmandu, the festival of Dewali is in full flow, our senses are in overload, noise, smells, sights and dodging the taxis, tiger balm sellers and trekking touts.

Our flight out of Kathmandu was at 9.30 a.m. this took us to Delhi where we had our onward connection to the U.K. I would like to be able to say that leaving Nepal was a whole lot easier than our entry but it was not to be.

We left our hotel at 7.a.m. A little Nepal taxi man bundled our bags into his taxi, and, after agreeing a price he drove us to the airport, depositing us outside at about 7.30 a.m. Inside the airport folk were milling around but no signs to tell us where we needed to go; we asked an official looking chap and with a lot of hand waving and gesturing he directed us to a long queue. Most of the people waiting were of Nepalese, Indian or Chinese origin.

A young man in the queue sought us out and asked if we were English. His command of our language was excellent and he told us that he worked for the British forces in Afghanistan, spending so many weeks there then returning to Kathmandu to see his family; his work entailed organising the transportation of supplies within Afghanistan.

Once our bags were checked, weighed and tagged for onward transportation to Heathrow we were given our boarding pass. Our bags were sent upstairs to immigration. Here there were less folk and two Nepalese beckon us to their oversized desks and thrust departure forms in our faces; I complete mine, giving passport and visa numbers. The guy takes all my documents and after checking the details stamps my boarding card with his stamp.

Behind me my friend Carole is having trouble; the chap at her desk is talking with his colleague and then presses a bell. Confusion reigns; it appears Carole's visa was only for 15 days which expired days ago, despite the fact we had paid for 30 days at the border; in our haste and the mayhem of crossing we had failed to see this. The boss man arrives and insists she pays in full again; this was difficult; we had got rid of our Nepalese money. We had a little sterling and a 20\$ note that the Chinese had rejected, but they insisted and would accept any of these currencies.

Carole is given a two page document to fill out, in the meantime I am constantly told to go on through to the next room, but I am very reluctant to leave her to cope with this hassle on her own and make it very clear I am not going. Together we fill out the form and hand it back to the desk, once again the boss man is called and he gives the form the once over before handing it back to a group of Nepalese sat the other end of the room.

They laugh and joke with one another, everything is done in Nepalese time and each of the men seems to have to have an input to the form. Eventually boss man returns to us with the form; indicates the double glass doors and tells us to pay; it has taken some time to get the form stamped and we are aware that our flight is now boarding. As we pass through the doors we walk past another oversize and empty desk and continue on towards the end of what is essentially a large corridor, at the end men and women are queuing separately to have their bags and boarding passes checked.

Carole hands over her form and the young girl flaps her arms and shouts no, no, and waves us away. At a loss to know where we are supposed to go and with time running out we walk back to the glass doors and find the boss man and get him to escort us through the process.

He walks towards the desk and points, we try to explain there is nobody there, he glances at the desk and pulls out his mobile phone and punches in a number and from the desk we hear a ringing

As we walk towards the desk a sleepy head appears over the top, it is obvious that the little guy was head down fast asleep and easily missed. Boss man and I laugh but Carole is spitting teeth. She quickly pays and we hurry to the baggage check and get our boarding cards stamped; although we are rushing we still have a further bag check on the tarmac; when we settle in our seats we could see the funny side of this situation, for a time it had looked like we may miss our flight and onward connection.

Things did not improve much in Delhi; as we walked into Delhi terminal from our plane, people who had onward flights were told to wait to one side of the door. This proved really difficult as the space just inside the door quickly filled and we were pushed by the incoming crowd.

There was a lot of shouting from various airport personnel trying to locate their passengers and take them to their appointed waiting areas; there was only six of us going to the U.K. by Virgin, but a whole load of folk travelling by other airlines to many parts of the world, it was bedlam. We eventually located the Virgin representative; he checked our passports against his list and told us to follow him, easier said than done. Whilst pushing our way through the crowds we lost him and it was several minutes before he returned to find us.

We were eventually deposited in a departure lounge; our 'e' ticket and passport were taken with the promise they would be returned in 30 minutes. One and half hours later we still had not got them back and a look at the board told us that our flight was boarding, one of the guys in our group agreed to go and investigate; he eventually returns with the Indian lady plus our documents. We had been forgotten in the transit lounge and only when our gent investigated did they realise.

We were rushed through a bag check and on to the plane; we were the last on to the plane and were quickly settled into our seats on the last leg of our journey home. We hoped that our bags had made it too and were not languishing in a corner of Delhi airport.

Writing this for the magazine has given me time to reflect on the journey that we have recently taken across Asia.

The two months of travelling in some of our worlds most breathtaking and awesome scenery has been just the very best despite some of the discomforts that we soft westerners felt along the way. Travelling in these countries makes you realise just how lucky we are to have been born British and living in relative luxury. We did get our bags back, obviously I should have more confidence in our Indian friends, I should also be grateful I did not fall foul of altitude sickness. Since arriving home I have received e-mail from our Dutch friends who we left out there continuing their trek in Nepal; regrettably two people in their party died from altitude sickness.

Now! Let's get the atlas out and see where else I might like to go.

As a postscript and for my own interest I added up the distance travelled, the total does not include the kilometres we covered by bus, as I have no means of checking.

Kilometres/miles Travelled: -

Heathrow to Shanghai.....	5771 miles.....	9235 km
Shanghai to Chengdu.....	1036 miles.....	1658 km
From airport into Chengdu.....	11 miles.....	18 km
Chengdu to Lhasa by train.....	2100 miles.....	3360 km
Lhasa to Kathmandu.....	812 miles.....	1300 km
Kathmandu to Pokahara.....	89 miles.....	143 km
Pokahara to Kathmandu.....	89 miles.....	143 km
Kathmandu to Heathrow.....	4590 miles.....	7345 km #

(Including flight from Kathmandu to Delhi)

At total of **14,409** miles were covered by air and train plus the unknown distances we rode on the buses or walked; and the Four-wheel drive vehicles used throughout our time in Tibet.

