



Machapuchare



Dhaulagiri

[photos by H. D. Whitehouse

## 1974 – a vintage year

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On 1 January, we left Florida on our way home from Costa Rica. We had been there as members of an astronomical expedition to observe the comet Kohoutek and also an annular eclipse of the sun. We had a camp on the Pacific coast, a short distance from beautiful sandy beaches where one could sunbathe all day and the water was always warm. It was good to watch the sun go down into the sea every evening and afterwards to study the constellations with the aid of modern telescopes. What a place to spend Christmas, far from the dull skies and damp cold at home!

In March we left with a party of twenty people – including three members of the Cairngorm Club\* – for a trek in Nepal under the guidance of a very competent leader provided by Bales' tours. We spent two days in Delhi and went to Agra to see the Taj Mahal. The short flight from Delhi to Kathmandu gave us superb views of some of the world's highest mountains. Kathmandu is a fascinating mixture of the old and the new – Buddhist temples, modern buildings, bazaars full of exotic goods and a supermarket in the course of being built by old and well-tried and very labour-intensive methods. Inevitably, modern hotels and banks and offices are changing the character of the old city, but the ancient temples and statues were being repaired and the Nepalese are obviously proud of their heritage. We found everyone very friendly and there were few obvious signs of the appalling poverty so often seen in the Indian sub-continent. Another short flight over the mountains took us to Pokhara where our trek was to commence. Each day we would walk about 8 or 10 miles to a camp site where tents and food would be provided for us. All we had to contribute was our own sleeping bag. Our porters comprised a large band of men and three girls and we also had one charming and super-efficient Sherpani. Everything was carried on human backs and all the party seemed happy, singing as they strode along with the most daunting loads – apparently 60 kilos is quite a normal load in these parts. Mostly we were going up or down very steep paths where wheeled traffic is unknown and impossible. Many of the fields were being ploughed ready for spring sowing of the staple foods, principally rice. We were generally about 8,000 feet above sea level and there were

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many small villages. The snow-line in these parts seems to be around 15,000 feet at this time of year, though we did have some wet snow falling at just over 10,000 feet on one occasion. As we progressed we had occasional glimpses of snow covered mountains, particularly Annapurna and Machapuchare, but unfortunately the weather was often cloudy and we had quite a lot of rain.

Our furthest and highest camp should have provided us with magnificent views of the Annapurna range, but heavy rain clouds prevented all but a few photographs being taken. We were, however, able to get plenty of pictures of people as our camp sites and lunch stops always attracted a crowd of children if we were near a village. Quite often a villager would come and play us a tune on a locally made fiddle. Several of the villages had schools and some of the children could speak a little English. We also met some Gurkhas on leave and one of them gave us a resumé of the Chancellor's Budget. In spite of the rain, water was often a problem at camp sites though our cook never failed to provide copious supplies of tea. We also filled our water bottles with tea for the day's march. The rhododendron display, so we were told, was not up to its usual splendour, but we did see a lot of tree orchids and magnolia trees in bloom. Occasionally we would have tantalising glimpses of the great mountains, but the photographer had to be quick! Our last camp on the shore of a lake was reached by dugout canoe. From here we were able to walk right to our aeroplane. Our Sherpas presented each of us with the ceremonial white scarf and we felt sad to be parting from our hardworking Sherpas and porters who had looked after us so well.

In July we joined a Wildlife Safari to Indonesia, the party being made up of eight Swiss and us two Britishers. This party of ten assembled in Frankfurt and we flew to Singapore by Lufthansa. We only had a short time there, but gained the impression of a prosperous and rapidly growing city. We were told that 60 per cent of the population is under 25 years of age. From Singapore we flew on to Medan, the capital of northern Sumatra. We found the service on Garuda Indonesian airways equal to anywhere and the stewardesses ahead of anywhere else in beauty, elegance and manner. After our arrival in Sumatra we had a long drive into the hills to Lake Toba. We were glad to reach a hotel and enjoy a shower and a sleep after a journey which had taken us nearly halfway round the world. Lake Toba is described as the pride of north Sumatra and lies in a setting of jungle-covered hills with villages along the shore and on the various islands. Some of these we were able to visit by boat and see something of the

way of life of the Batak people who live there. The Batak houses with their high, horn-shaped roofs are a characteristic and unique feature.

From Lake Toba we drove through tropical country, often stopping at wayside villages to talk to people or watch what they were doing or to buy the most delicious fruit, most of it of kinds we had never seen before. The land was obviously very fertile and we saw little sign of poverty, and most of the children seemed to be able to attend school. As we entered the jungle area and approached the rain forest where we were to camp, the road became worse and worse and the bridges unusable. However, we arrived eventually, long after dark, and were glad to find the tents ready for us in a clearing surrounded by all the noises of the jungle. A short walk from the camp led to a sparkling clear river which provided us with washing facilities and all other mod cons. This part of the country is where the orang-utans are found, and we were able to see several of these at a centre where some young animals are fed and protected in the hope of increasing the population. They were relatively tame and allowed themselves to be stroked, though they are quite free to wander in the jungle.

As we walked along the jungle trails, we saw lots of huge butterflies, while various kinds of monkeys chattered and screamed in the trees. Tree frogs and cicadas added their own contributions to the concert. We were told that there were no poisonous snakes in Sumatra, but we did see one very large snake which had been killed, so one rather wondered. Leeches were by far the worst feature, as they get inside shoes, travel up the inside of one's trousers, and, indeed, attach themselves anywhere so that constant vigilance is necessary. However, no serious harm seems to result from their attentions.

After leaving Sumatra, we visited Jakarta and Surabaya in Java. Both cities are growing rapidly and showing every sign of prosperity though one can still get about very cheaply in the cycle 'rickshaws'. The dances and shadow plays which we were able to see are a traditional feature and totally unlike anything we had seen before.

Our most distant point from home was the island of Bali, only around 2,000 miles from Australia. Bali has high volcanic mountains, rice paddies, tropical fruit in profusion, flowers everywhere and, of course, the world-famed beaches. Outrigger sampans with triangular brightly coloured sails look most picturesque. There are always plenty available to take tourists for a sail, and few can resist them. Again we watched dances, shadow plays and religious processions. The latter are very frequent and present an absolute riot of colour. The women wear their gayest sarongs, put flowers in their hair, and carry offerings

beautifully fashioned from palm leaf or flowers or even food. Apart from looking beautiful, the people seem to be artists in whatever they do. Whether they are just serving a meal, weaving cloth, pounding rice, carving wood or making silver ornaments, they seem always to be graceful in their movements and the end product is always pleasing to the eye. There are endless shops selling the locally made batik cloth which is most attractive to the tourist, especially those whose figures are not made for gay patterns. We would usually have our meals at a beach restaurant, just tables and chairs on the sand and a matting roof overhead. We will always remember the delicious freshly caught fish which was grilled to perfection and served with fresh limes.

On our way home we spent a day or two at Jogjakarta and were able to visit the world famous Buddhist temple at Borobudur – an enormous structure of stone with innumerable statues of Buddha and stone carvings of scenes from his life. Borobudur has been described as a religion in stone and it certainly inspires awe and wonder. After that, it was home via Jakarta, Singapore, Bangkok and farewell to our Swiss friends in Frankfurt.

