



Nepal

Sublime surrounds simple life



WORKING THE LAND: In top photo, children carry fodder in a mountain village in Nepal. Above, a Nepali man uses an ox-driven plow on his farm.

Ticket to ride

Coloradoan readers who travel the world shouldn't just keep their adventures to themselves. Why not show your slides to everyone else in Fort Collins? We're inviting travelers who want to write about their experiences to submit their stories and pictures to the *Coloradoan*. Publication won't propel writers to world fame, but it will explain how Fort Collins residents travel and may give your neighbors some ideas for trips. We want unusual stories to unusual places, as well as the usual haunts. But that's not to say a trip to La Junta for the watermelon festival wouldn't be interesting.

Stories should be no more than 1,000 words in length. Writing should be as precise and focused as possible. All stories are subject to editing; not all stories will be published.

If you're interested, send your stories to Lifestyles Editor Cindy Osburn, 1212 Riverside Ave., Fort Collins, CO 80524.

By **HOLMES ROLSTON**

For the *Coloradoan*

The climb was steep and taxing all day, like climbing stairs for miles. I rounded the ridge and there was Annapurna South, ethereal in the clouds. The trail was huge flagstone steps, built up over the centuries, with washouts and rougher scrambles.

After three days of trekking, with peaks now towering 20,000 feet above, I understood the myths of Shangri La. Himalayas in Sanskrit means "abode of the snows." These mountains start where the Colorado mountains stop.

Trekkers "conquer" mountains, but Nepalis see reminders of mystery and the transcendent.

Machhapuchhre, the "fishtail," from its striking split summit, is too sacred to climb. I became content to admire the beauty from below.

None of us could have made the climb carrying our own gear. Each was given a duffel bag, and two were assigned one porter, who shouldered the double load, held on his back only by a head strap. Was I violating human rights loading him down so?

We spent the nights in lodges, comfortable and well fed. Here, too, everything had been carried in on human backs.

I found the trek a bizarre combination of the sublime majesty of nature and the simple life of the Nepalis. They eke out a living terracing steep slopes, planting millet, rice, maize, spices, with enormous manual labor. They cut fodder in the glades for a cow, or a buffalo.

Half the mountains are deforested, with, nevertheless, an aesthetic appeal in the sinuous terrace lines, thrown into relief by the winter sun, low in the sky.

My initial reaction was how backward the Nepali people are. I passed women carrying huge loads of forage, or wicker baskets of manure to scatter on the terraces, or loads of stones to build up the retaining walls. They weave their own baskets and mats, and pound millet to make flour. Men plow with wooden plows pulled by yokes of oxen.

A bare-foot girl was carrying her baby brother, who was bare bottomed. Up the hill, their mother was nursing another child. Women, on average, have five children, a terrifying population growth. Sons are desired; daughters are a liability and married off as soon as possible.



About the author

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Parents arrange the marriages. One-third of 15-year-old girls are married.

These people have no electricity, no plumbing, little heating, no roads, no carts, rarely a flashlight or a radio. A water spout serves 10 or 20 homes, where the women wash clothes and dishes. They eat, with their bare hands, what they raise or barter. Toilets are primitive, if not just made in the fields. Eat with your right hand, we were told; your left is to wipe after toilet.

Three-quarters are illiterate. Many children were undernourished. Only one person in a hundred ever sees a doctor. Their life expectancy is 54 years. A family's annual income is \$150, though subsistence farmers hardly take part in the national economy.

Once a month, they walk out to a larger town to markets that look like a cross between flea markets and trash dumps.

Over 40,000 trekkers a year bring an infusion of hard currency. This enables many to remain in the villages, rather than flee to the greater poverty of Kathmandu.

Though backward, there is integrity written into the lines of their weathered faces. They are poor in material goods, but the timeless virtues are here — love, honesty, courage, resolution, endurance, thrift, hope and laughter, of which we heard much.

Everyone greeted us, "Namaste," ("I salute all the divine qualities in you"). The primeval mountains seemed matched by the primeval people.

Also, I was trekking backward in history, living in antiquity. My ancestors lived much this way. I had no electricity as a child and drew water from a cistern. I plowed with mules and shoveled manure on fields. My ancestors, though, had a continent rich in

natural resources to develop.

Most of these people can never be more than subsistence farmers. I lamented their hard life. Once, some small children sent to cut ferns for their buffalo with hand sickles, asked (as our guide translated) for "medications." One pointed to a cut on her hand. I applied a band-aid and she winced. Others also had cuts.

We trekked through rhododendron forests. Nepal has 6,500 species of trees, shrubs and flowers, including 300 orchid species, and 800 bird species.

In Royal Chitwan National Park, we searched for wildlife riding the backs of elephants and found the Asian one-horned rhinoceros. I didn't see a Bengal tiger, but was within 30 yards of three in our group who did, and saw grasses moving where they pointed. That's close!

I saw hanuman langurs, rhesus monkeys, peafowl, barking deer, spotted deer (chital) and hog deer. A highlight was flushing a dozen red jungle fowl, the still-wild ancestors of all domestic chickens.

The tigers survive because of mosquitoes. This area was too malarious to live in until the 1950s and was kept as a hunting preserve for nobility during the drier seasons. King George V shot 10 rhinos and 21 tigers here in 1911.

My final trek, in Sagarmatha National Park, was tougher, in thin air and with more primitive accommodations.

Sagarmatha, "the Goddess of the Universe," is the Nepali name for Everest. We were high enough to see yaks, with curling horns and shaggy coats, and tahr, mountain goats — though not yeti! The reward was the thrill of being as close to Mt. Everest as you can without being a mountaineer.

The sublime again surrounded the simple life.