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Detectives on Everest

Chapter 4

On the Trails of History

There was no ship or seasickness. There was no five week walk through dense jungles, over high Himalayan passes and across arid deserts. No, the 2001 Mallory & Irvine Research Expedition had it pretty easy. We simply hopped on planes near our homes and, some 48 hours later, with sore rear-ends and swollen ankles, we touched down with a resonant "Thud!" upon the tarmac of Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu, Nepal.

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It was quite a different situation for the early British Everest Expeditions, for the world and its technology was far different at that time. The expedition members of that day and age boarded ships in London in February and, some three weeks of green-faced sailing later, found themselves afoot in the port of Calcutta, India. And the trip had just begun: Trains then took them from Calcutta to the British hill station of Darjeeling on the southern border of Sikkim. In Darjeeling the expedition would choose its Nepali and Tibetan high-altitude support staff before commencing an arduous, five week trek north through Sikkim and into forbidden Tibet.

Although later reconnaissance and expeditions would prove that within Nepal's borders lay the easiest route up Everest's closely guarded flanks, the tiny Himalayan Kingdom was not an option in the 1920s. On September 14, 1846, a man named Jang

Bahadur had led a bloody coup d'état and took over the position of prime minister of Nepal. He allowed the Shah monarchy to continue in name only while he and his ministers controlled the state. Jang Bahadur "assumed the honorific title rana and ushered in more than a century of hereditary autocratic rule by his descendants...Absolute power was vested within the Rana oligarchy, and Nepal was administered as their private estate."¹

A complex group, the Rana's enacted a policy of strict isolationism: no one was allowed to enter the Kingdom from the outside without permission directly from the Rana regime. However, the Rana's themselves were worldly in the grandest sense. Their children studied at Eton and Oxford, the family drove Rolls Royce's which were hand-carried to Kathmandu from India, and they constructed monolithic palaces in obvious emulation of Victorian style.

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The first crux of the 2001 Expedition lay only minutes from the tarmac, in the baggage claim area where some 117 duffel bags, boxes, and containers, filled to the brim with tents, stoves, oxygen and other equipment, waited for the team. With excitement brewing, the main team of Eric Simonson, Dave Hahn, Andy Politz, Tap Richards, Brent Okita and John Race were met by Jake Norton and team historian Jochen Hemmleb who had arrived in the Himalayan capital earlier. After collecting the borderline-absurd amounts of gear, the team cleared customs and boarded a bus to the smoggy, hectic streets of Kathmandu downtown.

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The Kathmandu Valley is the political and cultural seat of Nepal, a remarkably complex and intricate country sandwiched between the subcontinent of India to the south and the high plateau of Chinese Tibet to the north. Originally containing four independent principalities - Kathmandu, Patan, Bhaktapur, and Kirtipur - the Kathmandu Valley, and

¹Slusser, Mary Shepherd. *The Nepal Mandala*. Princeton University Press, page 78.

eventually the nation, was united in 1769 by the King of Gorkha, Prithvi Narayan Shah. Ahead of him lay the difficult task of unifying a nation as geographically and culturally diverse as any in the world. In its 54,000 square miles – roughly the size of Illinois – live about 25 million people who comprise Nepal's 36 distinct ethnic groups², or tribes, each with its own language and dialects thereof. Geographically, too, the Kingdom encompasses an incredible variety: the Terai region of the south – at about 200 feet above sea level - occupies the jungles of the Indo-Gangetic plain, playing host to Bengal tigers, white rhinos, Indian elephants, and the sloth bear, to name but a few. Within a mere 150 miles follow the forested foothills of the Chure and Mahabharat ranges and the fertile midlands of Pahar, ascending to the crest of the Great Himalaya with nine of the world's fourteen 8,000 meter- (26,250 feet-) peaks. No other country in the world shows a similar elevation gain.

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After a 20 minute ride through the mind bending streets of Kathmandu, the expedition arrived at Great Escapes Trekking, the Nepalese agency which arranges the details of any Himalayan excursions by Expedition 8000, Eric Simonson's company. Here our group met the Nepali team which would become the backbone of the expedition in the months to come. With sixteen Nepalis in total, the expedition added greatly to its Himalayan background. All the Nepali climbers had been on previous expeditions, and all but two had summited Everest before. Additionally, most of the Nepali team members were old friends and climbing partners of the Western members. Head cook, Pemba Sherpa, was on his thirteenth expedition with Simonson. For Sirdar Pa Nuru Sherpa, the 2001 trip was his fifth expedition for Expedition 8000.

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The idea of climbing the great Himalayan peaks was not traditional for the Nepali people. For them, the Himalaya were (and, to many, still are) literally the "Abode of

² See Bista, Dor Bahador. 1987. The People of Nepal. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar.

Snows" or the Gods, and to tread its snowy summits was to trespass on the divine. With the rush of Western explorers in the Indian Subcontinent in the mid-1800's, however, came the subsequent desire to climb and "conquer" the Himalayan giants. The early sahibs – including the British pre-World War II climbers - understood immediately that assistance from the local people would prove invaluable in their attempts to climb these high mountains. The first Nepali people hired for expedition work in the early 1900s were the Sherpa living in Darjeeling, India. Over the years, the Sherpa were hired again and again as climbing partners and assistants in the Himalaya. When Sherpa Tenzing Norgay summited Everest with Sir Edmund Hillary 1953, the members of this small Nepali hill tribe hit the world news.

Over the past 50 years, the term Sherpa has taken on a new meaning in the Western world. Rather than designating a Himalayan tribe, one often hears people referring to anyone, anywhere who carries loads in the mountains as a Sherpa. Unfortunately, this is a misinterpretation.

The Sherpa people came to Nepal from Tibet some 800 years ago over the Nangpa La (*La* meaning "pass") near Mount Cho Oyu. The word *Sherpa* itself was originally less of a proper name and more of a locator: *shar* in Tibetan means “east” and *pa* means people. Thus, when asked who they were, the Sherpa would reply “*shar pa*”: “We are people from the east.” After crossing the 19,000 foot Nangpa La, the Sherpa settled primarily in the Solu-Khumbu region of Nepal, at the foot of Mount Everest. Other Sherpa live in the districts of Rolwaling, Helambu, the Arun Valley, Kathmandu, and in Darjeeling, India. Not only were the Sherpa, who lived at high altitudes day in and day out, perfectly fit for high altitude work, but geography and politics also assisted in their rapid rise to Himalayan fame. When Nepal opened its doors to the world in 1950, the Southeast Ridge was discovered as the most hospitable route to the world’s highest summit. Simultaneously, access to the Tibetan side of the mountain was sealed off by the Chinese. Everest was the understandable focal point of Himalayan mountaineering efforts, and the Sherpa were poised right at its base.

Until recently, the Sherpa have reaped little reward and received disproportionately minute praise for their Himalayan efforts. Sir Edmund Hillary, Reinhold Messner, Sir Chris Bonington, Jim Whittaker, Mallory & Irvine: these are all somewhat of household

names in the West. Unfortunately rare, however, is knowledge of Ngawang Gombu, who was the first to summit Everest twice. Or Ang Rita, who has climbed Everest 11 times without supplemental oxygen. Or Babu Chiri, who first spent 22 hours on the summit of Everest in 1999 and the following year made an unprecedented 16 hour 45 minute climb from Basecamp to the summit along the Southeast Ridge. Sadly, while we were on the mountain in late April, we received the news that this great alpinist was killed in a crevasse fall while guiding on another expedition to the South Side of Everest.

The 2001 Mallory & Irvine Research Expedition reflected the capacity of the Sherpa climbers: of its sixteen Nepali climbers, all but one - 19 year old Phunuru Sherpa - had summited at least once.

While speaking of recognition of the Sherpa, it is important to note that not all Nepalis who climb in the Himalaya are Sherpa. Some of Nepal's 36 ethnic groups – like the Rana Tharu - live in the southern lowlands and are not known for their Himalayan prowess. However, many groups inhabit the valleys of the Himalaya, growing up in villages similar to those of the Solu-Khumbu region. Although the Sherpa are still the unrivaled leaders in Himalayan climbing, others - Tamang, Rai, Limbu, Magar, Gurung, etc. - are rapidly making their presence felt in the Himalayan climbing scene. The 2001 Mallory & Irvine Research Expedition was no exception: Man Bahadur Tamang joined his third Expedition 8000 trip and hoped to get his third summit of Everest. "MB", as we called him, had been with Simonson and Norton on Cho Oyu in 1997, and again with Simonson on Everest's Southeast Ridge in 1998; he has also climbed Makalu. Tara Bir Yakha, a Limbu from Dhankuta, joined the trip as assistant cook to Pemba. Although his home is only a thousand feet above sea level, Tara has been an expedition cook on many trips and repeatedly made the journey from 17,000 foot Rongbuk Basecamp to 21,000 foot Advanced Basecamp.

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For the members, arrival in Kathmandu marked the true beginning of the 2001 Mallory & Irvine Research Expedition. The two year hiatus since Mallory's discovery hadn't taken the edge off the team's passion with the mystery, as Hemmleb had found out

straight away: "When Jake met me at the airport, I thought 'Take it easy. Don't shift immediately into research mode. Take time to enjoy each other's company first'. We went to our hotel rooms – and five minutes later had airphotos and maps scattered all over the place. The ghosts of Everest hadn't let us off the hooks one iota."

Yet in the relaxed mood and the relative normalcy of urban Kathmandu, it was easy for the team to forget the huge undertaking on which they would soon embark. They would not simply be climbing Everest – which in itself is nothing to scoff at – but hoped to live at Camp VI (27,000 feet) for days at a time and scour the treacherous, deadly slopes of Everest's North Face in search of traces of Mallory & Irvine. Simonson, always the rational one and not one to mince words or pad reality, brought the team to focus immediately. As Jake Norton recalls: "We had just cracked beers and were theorizing about what we might find and where when Eric said: 'Guys, we gotta acknowledge that this is big time, and it is not unlikely that when we get back here in 10 weeks, one of us may not be along. Anyone of you guys could die up there on this trip. I don't want to be morbid or anything, but let's keep that in mind, OK?' It was definitely a reality check. Not that any of us took Everest lightly or anything, but it is always an eye-opener to have the possibility of death thrust into the forefront of a conversation."

With that weighty thought in their minds, the team began discussing the fineries of the months to come. The first team dinner of the 2001 Mallory & Irvine Research Expedition rapidly became a brainstorming session, wiping away the distractions of hunger and jet-lag. All who had been there in 1999 had spent the past two years pondering the final days of Mallory & Irvine, and surmising about future searches. Okita and Race, on the other hand, were new to the research and had a full share of questions. What was the terrain like in the search zones? Where exactly was Mallory found? The discussions built in intensity as the night wore on.

It was obvious that the team was far better prepared this year than in 1999 from many standpoints. First and foremost, they knew what they would encounter on the mountain. Everyone had been at least once to Everest, and had either summited or climbed high on the Northeast Ridge. In the two years between 1999 and 2001, Hemmleb – with help from the other members - had put together a research manual outlining the previous findings and the goals for the upcoming trip. Erich Keller of Swissphoto near Zurich,

Switzerland, had provided the expedition with airphotos of the upper North Face of Everest showing the principle research area in exceptional detail. And, finally, Simonson and Great Escapes Trekking had put together a stellar group of Nepalese cooks and climbers to assist on the mountain. We had learned from our experiences and mistakes two years ago, and had armed ourselves accordingly

The next days were spent with last-minute preparations. The city of Kathmandu has gone through enormous changes over the past few years. Modernity has made inroads into the medieval capital with increased intensity, bringing with it elements of the convenience and availability we have come to expect in the West. The impact these conveniences have made on major Himalayan expeditions – such as the 2001 Mallory & Irvine Research Expedition – is huge: no longer is it necessary for all food and equipment to be carted some 9,000 miles from the USA to Nepal.

As previously noted, the team brought from the USA some 117 duffel bags and boxes of equipment and supplies. To this, much more was to be added from the markets of Kathmandu. From Pringles Potato Chips to aluminum snow pickets to toilet paper, it was all to be bought locally. The streets and markets of Kathmandu alter one's sense of time, centuries intertwined like an ill-conceived quilt. The travel writer Pico Iyer wrote in his classic travelogue *Video Night in Kathmandu*:

"My first impression of the city was delirious. I felt as if I had tumbled into the jangled and kaleidoscoped subconscious of an opium freak. Sweet incense wafted out of stores crushed raggedly together along dusty, crooked streets, and out from their walls hung horror-eyed masks, spinning prayer wheels, druggy thanka scrolls and revolving lanterns. Mirrors caught the light on shoulder bags, long dresses streamed from carved wooden balconies, scarves fluttered in the breeze, demons stared out of rice-paper calendars. On every side, irregular, nine-storied temples jutted up, and then were obscured by a flutter of pigeons. Squeaky-voiced elves chattered around the shrines where they peddled Bhutanese stamps, paintings, English chocolate... Everywhere, the dusty streets spun and whirled and revolved like a mandala. Freaks and flute sellers wandered in circles around a main square where long-haired men from East and West, hipsters and hawkers, hustlers and heretics, ricocheted counters off the sides of Carom

boards. Snakelike icons wriggled from cardboard signs and elephant-headed gods sat in the middle of yellow-wreathed shrines and everywhere, staring down from walls and home and streamers, were eyes, eyes, narrow, painted pairs of eyes.

On an excursion to buy the solar panels, car batteries, and other materials needed for the team's electronic setup, Jake Norton headed into the market of Bagh Bazaar in downtown Kathmandu. He later wrote in his journal: "One would think - after ten trips to Nepal and two school programs spent here - that the novelty and wonder of Kathmandu would have worn off; that the smog, poverty, and inherently chaotic nature of the city would have transitioned from exciting to annoying. But, fortunately, it is just the opposite, and I continue to marvel at the sounds, sights, smells, and sensations throughout this place... The scene was familiar and yet still exciting: Silk saris flowed like water in the breeze while half-dead dogs scurried out of the way of honking taxis. A thousand-pound sacred cow lounged in the busy intersection of the bazaar, completely disregarding the frustrated people trying to get by. A porter carrying computers down the street on a tump line accidentally kicked over the wicker basket in which a club-footed man sporting a goiter the size of a football was collecting handouts. I passed a leper, his limbs wrapped in gauze, lying in the dust on the corner near the Nepal Solar Electric Company - where I was to spend over 100,000 rupees, or about the annual income of two average Nepali people. It was madness, a clashing of centuries and mixture of worlds, the collision of the 21st century and the 17th...It was Kathmandu in all its complexity and harshness, and, as always, it was challenging, refreshing, and wonderful."

Then the packing began. The yard of Great Escapes Trekking became somewhat of a disaster area, its green grass covered over with what seemed to be the entire contents of a supermarket and outdoor equipment store. A pile of seventy tents overflowed onto plastic trash bags spilling Pringles, Glucose Biscuits, and freeze-dried meals. Pemba and Panuru shouted orders in to the other Sherpa, directing the organizational melee. Blue packing barrels, already bursting with their payload of sleeping bags, stoves, and radios, were compacted again and again to fit "just one more" item inside. Thirty bright red propane bottles were delivered by a fleet of three-wheeled auto-rickshaws and stacked neatly near the mountain of Pemba's kitchen gear. Dokos, triangular wicker baskets piled high with goodies from Asan Tole Bazaar - tomatoes, ginger, spices of all kinds, chives, lettuce,

cucumber – found a safe haven in the back of a huge container truck, right next to the delicate cargo of 3200 eggs. It was a monstrous undertaking, but somehow packing all the food and equipment needed to sustain some forty people in Tibet for twelve weeks took less than one day.

That evening, it was time for celebration. The first stage of the expedition – packing, traveling, unloading, re-packing, re-loading – was behind them, and trip was soon to be underway. It was time for final errands in the tourist heart of Kathmandu: Thamel. Once a residential area full of classic Newari architecture, pagoda style temples from the 17th century, and bustling markets, Thamel has become the Himalayan equivalent of Times Square. It is the absolute definition of a free-market economy, with hawkers shouting their wares at every tourist: "Change money? Carpet buy? I give you my best price, Madame. Smoke? Hashish? You like incense? Hello, taxi?" The list goes on and on, ad infinitum. If it is bought or sold, it will be found in Thamel. Running errands in Thamel is thus an oxymoron: there is nothing speedy, no running, in Thamel. Distractions abound, and, if they don't slow you down, the cacophony of horns and hawkers, beggars and bargains, leads to such sensory overload that mental fatigue rapidly becomes overwhelming.

But, as always, the errands were run: Norton found a new ice hammer to replace the one left on his dryer back home. Hemmleb procured some last additions to the expedition library. Toothpaste, prayer flags, books, playing cards, postcards, and snacks were all bought on the barter system, and soon the team met for a final dinner at The Northfield Café. This would be the last meal for the team in a Western setting until late-May, and it would be savored.

The morning of March 15th was a clear one, and the team soon set off for the Friendship Highway and the border of Tibet. After forty-five minutes of navigating the dusty boulevards and alleyways of Kathmandu, the bus began to climb out of the smog of the Valley and towards the hill town of Dhulikhel. To the north, bits of white appeared above the lush, green canopy which drapes the valley rim. The Ganesh Himal and Langtang Ranges stick up like teeth just north of Kathmandu; the team was excited at the sight, for although snow-capped, much of the underlying rock was exposed after the dry

winter. A dry year – as was 1999 – was a promising sign, for little snow would obscure the artifacts they hoped to find. Spirits were high.

The bus bounced and weaved along the pavement of the Friendship Highway leading from Nepal over the border into Tibet. Cresting the valley rim, farmers carrying produce fresh from the fields scurried across the dusty streets of Dhulikhel, a small mountain hamlet which has found renewed economic vigor in the tourist resorts which dot its hillsides. This renewal, however, has come with a price, both for Dhulikhel and for the nation. Dhulikhel, in the Kavre-Palanchok district, is one of the poorer regions of Nepal. In recent years, the Maoist party of Nepal has gained sweeping popularity in such areas, its promises of social and economic equality striking a poignant chord with Nepal's most destitute citizens. Dhulikhel itself was the site of a major fire-fight between police and Maoist guerillas in April, 2000, and the district as a whole is a continued hotbed of political unrest.

Fortunately for the team, all was quiet as they passed. The ribbon of pavement which is the Friendship Highway cuts a modern swath through ancient terrain. Terraced hillsides crawl up steep hillsides pockmarked with the scars of landslides, an unfortunate reminder of the population pressures facing Nepal's delicate geography. In the fields flanking the highway, bright yellow flowers of mustard plants stand in stark contrast to the vivid green of rice patties and wheat fields. All around, life goes on as it has for centuries. Farmers till their fields with oxen and water buffalo, and carry their harvest to market in baskets traditionally carried on a tump line, a strap across the forehead. The Kavre-Palanchok district exemplifies the geographic diversity of Nepal: weaving through farms in sweltering heat at 2000 feet above sea level, it is hard to imagine that, a mere 50 miles to the north, lies the crest of the Great Himalaya.

After three hours of bouncy busing, the team arrived in a favorite spot: the town of Lamu Sangu. Perched on the banks of the Bhote Kosi (*khosi* meaning "river"), Lamu Sangu has the best *dhal bhaat* in the region. A hearty meal of rice (*bhaat*), lentils (*dhal*), vegetables (*tarkaari*), and meat (*maasu*), dhal bhaat is the meal of choice for most of Nepal's 25 million people, twice a day for all of their lives. For the thrifty visitor, dhal bhaat is the way to eat: in the local restaurants, an all-you-can-eat meal costs as little as

50 rupees (75 cents). The team settled onto benches overlooking the rushing waters and dined happily with the flies.

Soon enough, it was again time to drive. After Lamu Sangu, the highway begins to climb steadily, following the Bhote Kosi toward its source on the Tibetan Plateau. In recent years, Nepal, with the help of many NGO's and foreign aid, has begun to tap its vast hydro-electric potential. Every year, another river finds its waters dammed to provide for the electrical needs of the growing economy. With assistance from the Chinese government – and much to the chagrin of foreign-owned rafting companies – a major hydro project has recently been completed on the Bhote Kosi, bringing the advantages and pitfalls of electricity to this impoverished region.

Here the road itself is evidence of how difficult – and dubious – hydro projects can be in the Himalaya. Rushing tributaries cascade down the hillsides from all directions. Every few kilometers, with the bus rocking, tilting, and jolting at all angles, the team crosses a landslide, the pavement ripped down the hillside by monsoon torrents unleashing their fury. It is a beautiful, albeit difficult, place to call home.

After five hours of butt-busting driving, the team arrived in Kodari and the Tibetan border. After shuffling duffel bags from the bus to their rooms in the Lhasa Guest House, it was time to stretch legs and backs. A half-hour walk led them to the door of Liping Monastery, where they were greeted happily by abbot Ngawang Tenzing, and a twenty-year old monk. After a brief tour of the monastery, the team made offerings of a few hundred rupees and then climbed a small tower to gaze at the border below. This vantage point provided visual confirmation of what all the team felt: Kodari in Nepal and Zhangmu on the Tibetan side are both quintessential border towns, poverty-stricken, dirty, and rife with dashed hopes and meager livings. But, a somewhat intangible difference exists. Kodari, although equally poor if not more so, carries with it a spontaneity, a vibrancy, a vivacity which its neighbor is altogether lacking. Whatever the cause of this difference, its effect is deep: the two towns, separated physically by only feet, are separated spiritually by miles.

The following morning, the team passed through Nepali customs, crossed the Friendship Bridge, and, signing in with a Chinese military officer, crossed the border into

China. Another stage of the expedition was behind them. They were finally in Tibet, on their way to Everest.