



SHORT WALKS IN  
*Shangri-La*

PETER FRANCIS BROWNE

summersdale *travel*

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### **About the Author**

Peter Francis Browne is an award-winning documentary maker, film producer, director and playwright. He lives in Devon with his wife.

### **Other books by Peter Francis Browne**

Fiction

*Land's End*

*Sassenach*

Travel

*Rambling on the Road to Rome*



*In memory of Angela, loving sister and a great friend*



## Before

‘Have you climbed the Eiffel Tower yet?’

‘I’m only halfway up.’

‘How long’ll you be?’

‘Another half hour.’

‘That’s too long. The chops’re nearly done.’

‘I can’t rush it.’

‘It’s your choice. Unless you want them burnt?’ Mimi, my wife, sounded fraught.

‘Then turn the bloody gas down,’ I replied.

‘Anyone’d think you were attempting Everest. You’re only going for a sodding walk in Nipple.’

‘Nipple’s not walking, it’s trekking.’

‘What’s the difference?’

‘Altitude.’

‘So?’

‘So I might die of pulmonary oedema.’

‘What’s that?’

‘I’m not sure but it’s in the guidebooks along with pneumonia and frostbite.’

‘Why do you always have to dramatise?’

‘Because I have imagination.’

‘Imagine burnt chops.’

The kitchen window, ajar, inhaled a balmy March evening in Devon, eerie with tawny owls. But what if my neighbour heard? Would he see his positive equity slump because of the loonies living next door?

‘OK, I’ll finish after I’ve eaten.’

I was going to the Himalaya. My boots, the finest Italian leather with rubber soles – none of that lightweight synthetic crap – required breaking in, and my leg muscles, 54 years old, were in need of retreats.

I had read that walking up and down hills for weeks was a prerequisite of Himalayan travel but I lived in a

cul-de-sac despite being on the edge of Dartmoor. No rehearsal there; my theatre closed by foot-and-mouth disease. Not a public path open. So I had hatched a plan. I calculated the height between my hall and landing. Ten feet. The Eiffel Tower is 984 feet high. Thus a hundred ascents of the stairs would be the equivalent of climbing and descending 1,000 feet: just like a scene from *The Lavender Hill Mob* but without the vertigo – to which I am prone.

Up, and a vista of the farmed-salmon pink of the WC rising like a weak autumn sun above the treads. Down, and an exquisite woodcut of a hot-air balloon hovering above St Ives, chiselled by my eldest son. Up, down. Up, down. Sweat dripping from my unfit forehead. And always the danger of a fall from the untacked fifth tread.

Not like Everest? Nonsense. It was a real adventure. After all, more people die on stairs than they do in the Western Cwm.

The first Nepalis I encountered were sprawled in a transit lounge in Dubai, where I waited for my connecting flight. They were flying back to their families after a season of guest-working in the Gulf for minimal wages – although most had the accoutrements of Western civilisation avalanching onto the concourse: oblong ice-falls of microwaves, TVs and ghetto-blasters, all to be bluffed into the aircraft as hand luggage.

I worried about the extra weight. Would the airline make allowances? When the Captain called ‘Rotate’ at the crucial moment prior to take-off, would the plane actually leave the runway or plough into the Gulf? But when the flight was called, and the Nepalis stood up, my fears evaporated. They were all very short with not a beer belly amongst them. One Nepali, even with a 24-inch TV nonchalantly clutched against his hip as if it were a lunchbox, must weigh less than the average American. And surely the Seattle-based aeronautical engineers must have been aiming for the US market – despite giving their planes wings that seemed far too small, presumably on the scientific basis that, theoretically, a bumblebee is incapable of flight?

Oh! That wonderful moment when the plane trundles and lurches towards the runway, its oil-stained engines shuddering as it negotiates the omnipresent low-tech potholes, its Heath Robinson flaps – far too flimsy – being tested. They work. Hurrah! We can fly. And then, from static to roar. Only those with turbocharged cars can experience that thrown-back-into-the-seat thrill of pure acceleration.

The terminal building that must, logically, be halfway along the runway, scudding past. But still on the ground, like an attempt on the land-speed record. Get the bloody

thing *up*. And then, that little slurp of fluid in the semicircular canals that tells you you're airborne.

I was nose to the porthole as we bisected the Makran and Talar-I-Band deserts of Iran and Pakistan: desolate beaches, ripe for development, declining into the bikiniless green of the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. An antediluvian map of a landscape. Black, white and yellow aridity, like Dartmoor granite viewed through a magnifying glass; mica, feldspar and quartz. Dry wadis snaking down from barren mountains towards the sea, but no hint of vegetation anywhere. But there were roads, of a kind, leading to villages whose camouflaged houses cast just-discernible shadows. Even in this emptiness people survived, somehow. Fathers and mothers, no different to you and I, bringing up their children in a sunbaked desolation where the stamina of a single goat means the difference between milk and no milk. Life and death. That simple.

India was hidden by clouds, and with nothing to watch apart from a film espousing the superiority of Dubai golf courses, I succumbed to sleep until my ears told me that we were approaching Kathmandu.

I had selected a seat on the right in order to see Everest but it was late in the afternoon, and the Himalaya were veiled in grey. But as we broke through the mist I saw the foothills: khaki ridges, amphitheatred by rice paddies, dry in the pre-monsoon, and everywhere precipitous footpaths linking communities where delivery vans were still a fantasy as everything arrived by foot.

It was what I expected but, as with all travellers, the reality coalesced with preconceived images gleaned from *National Geographic*. But this was *real*. I was here, despite a gnawing feeling that I had cheated.

Quote your credit card number and, twelve hours later, you can be where you have always wanted to be.

## SHORT WALKS IN SHANGRI-LA

In 1967, aged 20, I had tried to reach Kathmandu overland, hitching and taking cheap trains, but it didn't happen. There was a war. In Istanbul, Russian warships were entering the Aegean via the Bosphorus. By the time I had reached Erzincan in eastern Turkey, I was told that the six-day war between Israel and its Arab neighbours precluded travel through Iran. The world was about to explode in a nuclear catastrophe. Actually Iran wasn't directly involved and I could have made it to Nepal had it not been for the incompetent advice of a jobsworth at the British Embassy in Ankara.

No doubt, having risen in the ranks, he now gets by on an extravagant pension, growing rare orchids in his Shropshire farmhouse, beneficiary of a lifetime's disinformation.

But, despite him, I was here now. I was in Nepal.

Coming out of Kathmandu Airport is a kick in the kidneys. You are there to see the Himalaya. All you have read about it being a Third World country has been forgotten. You simply want to sleep, see a temple or two, and trek off into the hills. But it's not like that.

Into the 35-degree heat and into a swarm of barefoot beggars and sharp-eyed touts held back by whistle-blowing police strutting and posturing like demented referees. Tourists are gold, and I realised that the mob was after me: a Westerner whose weekly income would keep a Nepali family in rice for a year.

'Safe taxi, sir?'

'Nice hotel, sir?'

I had booked a room by phone, at random, for my first night. Someone would meet me, I had been assured. Cardboard, felt-tipped with names, jiggled up and down like placards in a political demonstration. Maybe I should get a taxi to the city centre and wing it from there? And then I saw a sheet of paper with my name, misspelt, amongst the mayhem. I dragged my rucksack across the no man's land towards my contact whose name was Hari.

I shook hands; my first faux pas, for this Western demonstration of being swordless is an import and no part of Nepali culture.

'Mr Broom?'

'Yes.'

'Come with me please, sir.'

Someone grabbed my rucksack and held it aloft like a trophy as we barged through the throng. I tried to get it back.

'It's all right,' said Hari. 'Is safe.'

Several Nepali in rags accompanied us to a cab scarred with rusty wounds. In my naivety I assumed the entourage

were porters employed by the hotel, but after I was pushed into the vehicle I realised that they were simply impoverished. Grubby hands, palms up, snaked in, Kali-like, through the open windows.

The man who had purloined my rucksack was demanding money. ‘Rupees, sir?’

‘I don’t have any rupees. I haven’t changed any money yet.’

‘American money – for my coin collection.’

I delved into my pockets, but could only find a two-pence piece. I gave it to him. ‘That’s all I have.’ He snatched it and then we were off, in a puff of exhaust, into Kathmandu.

I stuck my head out of the window, trying to savour my first impression of the capital renowned, outside Nepal, as being south of the one-eyed yellow idol.

The sun was setting as we careered through chaotic city streets towards Thamel, the district where people like me invariably end up.

We were driving on the left, theoretically, but people and skeletal sacred cows – the slaughter of either incurred a penalty of years in prison – had to be avoided at all costs, even if it meant death by head-on collision. At roundabouts there was no logic, no right of way, but a bedlam of hooting, shouting and hitting of brakes, and at each lurch I was reminded of seat belts that worked. Holding one in a damp hand just isn’t the same.

Hari wanted to know all about me. ‘Your first visit to Kathmandu, sir?’

‘Yes, but please, I’d just like to look at it right now.’

‘You are coming from England?’

‘Yes.’ Hari knew where I came from but he was so charming that I had to go through the motions.

‘You like Kathmandu?’

‘So far.’

The entire city seemed an alien settlement on a noxious planet, its lower atmosphere composed entirely of carbon monoxide belching from the exhausts of motorised rickshaws, vans and motorbikes all running on lead-rich fuel. Already I could feel oxygen and chemicals vying for attention in my lungs, but the pollution was pretty.

The sun saturated the smog with backlit orange light, casting bright spectres of pedestrians against pink-tinged walls like shadow puppets.

Then we drove tortuously through Thamel, seemingly a sort of innocent Soho, until we turned into a dusty road and my hotel, which was far from the dump I had envisaged: red bougainvillea concealing cement which proclaimed a tourist boom.

‘Come,’ said Hari, shouldering all my luggage, his teenage arm muscles appearing even more meagre than mine.

There was a gatehouse of sorts, a cross between a pillbox and a cottage, from which emerged a tall, thin Indian-looking man, all in white, who joined his hands like a priest offering an amen.

‘Namaste,’ he said, bowing in welcome; the first of countless namastes – the unfailing Sanskrit salutation that means ‘greeting to the god in you’.

The hotel was a family affair run by a Buddha-eyed, flat-faced, high-cheekboned Tibetan couple who were dressed from neck to ankles in yellow and black patterns like bees.

The wife offered me a room that was nice enough.

‘How much?’

‘Ten dollars.’

My guts were rumbling and I found myself asking, ‘Anything en suite?’ This was daft. I was meant to be roughing it.

She led me up carpeted stairs and into a huge double

room with an adjoining sit-down lavatory, bath and shower, and *two* loo rolls. She ran the tap. 'Always hot water.'

'How much?'

'Fifteen dollars.'

I should have haggled but said, 'I'll take it.'

She switched on the ceiling fan, and its rotors ruffled my hair.

There was a window-box, pink with busy-lizzies, and I glimpsed a large brown rat scurrying between the petals. Not roughing it, but it wasn't a Hilton.

A thud of drums, accompanied by chanting, suddenly erupted close by but I didn't regard it as an intrusion; rather a fanfare welcoming me to a country I had visited in my imagination since adolescence. All those adventures described by Tilman, Herzog, Shipton, Morris and many more, camouflaged as textbooks in the school library as I pretended fascination with the Corn Laws and *The Knight of Burning Pestle*.

'You want to eat?'

'No thank you.'

She smiled and inclined her head. 'Sleep?'

The bed offered crisp white sheets, more tempting than a lover's flesh, her face an exquisite blank pillow. But how could I possibly sleep? It was one of those moments all travellers must experience: that sudden up-welling of happiness, where you want to shout, 'I am here! I'm bloody here!'

'I'd like a beer!'

'Here or on the terrace?'

'The terrace, please.'

'Tuborg or San Miguel?'

Endemic Catholic guilt kicked in. I had been expecting a monk's cell of a room, and a fetid hole in the floor for a toilet, but I was in the lap of luxury. Continental beer was a step too far.

'I'd like something Nepali.'

‘Tuborg or San Miguel?’

‘Tuborg.’

‘You want to shower first?’

I didn’t take the hint, if it was one. It was true that I hadn’t washed since leaving Devon and I was vaguely aware of odours resonant of Cornish pasties, rich in onion, wafting from my armpits, but there is only so much a roll-on can do.

She led me down to a door opening on to a roof garden where I sat alone in the gloaming surrounded by flowers. I could smell jasmine. The earthenware pots around me sprouted familiar blooms: sweet williams, marigolds, nasturtiums and geraniums, all glowing out of focus as all flowers seem to do in the last light.

An open space on the far side of the road was umbrellaed by tall trees with flaking boles like eucalyptuses. Crows croaked, invisible in the foliage, and towards the west I saw the silhouettes of egrets, their legs trailing as if palsied, heading home to roost.

Hari arrived with a bottle sequinned with ice crystals and poured my beer into a glass he cleaned with his fingers.

‘Sir, you are going to the mountains?’

‘Yes.’

‘I have a friend. Tomorrow, nine o’clock, he will come to see you. No problem.’

I wasn’t entirely sure what he meant but I didn’t give it another thought.

Hari remained, hovering by the table, and I cracked the embarrassing silence between us blandly.

‘Does your family come from Kathmandu?’

‘No, sir, I am from Trisuli.’ With pride.

‘It’s a good job?’

‘Yes, sir. A thousand rupees a month.’ Less than ten pounds.

‘You work all year?’

'No, sir. Only in the tourist season.' About four months altogether, spring and autumn.

'And when you are not here, what do you do?'

'I go home.'

'And work?'

'No, sir. No work, no jobs.' He smiled. I wondered why.

While I was staying at the hotel, whatever the time, night or day, Hari was never absent and always busy. On duty twenty hours in twenty-four.

I supped Tuborg, imagining the bellies of 747s, pregnant with bottles, on special missions from Scandinavia.

It was only much later I learned that it was brewed just down the road.

Time to see Kathmandu. At least a bit of it.

The track was like a maze and dimly lit by street lights. Bats patrolled between bulbs, and crickets thrummed from a patch of wasteground. I stepped on a run-over rat, flat as a photograph, and had to sidle between three skulking feral mongrels, all mange and ribs, who sniffed my legs as I passed. But for once dogs did not concern me, even in this city where rabies is endemic, for I had endured the jabs.

Then out into streets that should have surprised me, and did. Mini-marts, trekking agencies, an Internet café, and shops selling cheap kukris, carpets, crudely carved Hindu gods, and T-shirts emblazoned with tigers, snow leopards, and statements such as ‘I’ve rafted the Kali Gandaki’ and ‘I’ve been to Everest’. Not *climbed* Everest. But you can. Anyone. For \$40,000. Before leaving England I read a feature in an outdoors magazine advertising an ascent which included a pre-expedition training weekend in North Wales. Day 3: Free for last-minute shopping in Kathmandu. Days 19–57: Climb Everest. Day 64: Last-minute shopping in Kathmandu or relaxing by the pool. Nowadays nowhere is beyond the well-heeled tourist: not even space.

A man tapped my shoulder. ‘You want stuff?’

‘Stuff?’

He inhaled smoke from an imaginary spliff, exhaled with a rolling of eyes, and grinned.

‘Not today, thank you.’ He might have been an agent provocateur.

Tourists creaked by in bicycle rickshaws, like minor Raj officials. Something pinched my arm. It was a woman’s bony fingers. A ring through her septum, a newborn baby shawled in her free hand.

‘Money, sir? Milk for my baby.’

Her wrinkled skin and gummy mouth made me suspect that she was the grandmother, but how can one tell in a country which, even in the Third World, has the distinction of being one of the few where women die, on average, younger than men? I had no change and could do nothing for her.

‘I’m sorry, but I can’t help.’

Later, I changed money and went in search of food.

The distinction between traveller and tourist has gone forever. Even explorers are devalued. What is left to explore? No one has hopped to the North Pole blindfolded, but someone will eventually. In my hubristic youth, when I despised tourists – aka holidaymakers – I would have sought out an insanitary joint serving authentic food on principle, but I didn’t want the squits on my first night, so I selected a salubrious rooftop restaurant. A moustached bouncer, turbaned and uniformed, saluted me before I climbed wrought-iron spiral stairs leading to starched tablecloths glittering with cruets.

A bow-tied waiter pounced and ushered me to a table designed for four, overlooking the street.

This was going to cost me a bomb, but I didn’t care. It was my first night. The menu arrived. I was shocked. It listed everything a hungry man could desire: Western and Asian cuisine, but the price! Nothing over £2 and ALL SALADS SOAKED IN IODINE SOLUTION FOR 40 MINUTES. Something cooked, but what? It had to be *daal bhaat*, the staple diet of Nepal. My waiter’s face dropped. It was the equivalent of ordering ham, eggs and chips with ketchup at Le Manoir aux Quat’Saisons.

Chaos ruled below as a policeman, screaming through his whistle, prevented taxis damaging a man crawling across the junction on hands and knees. The cripple moved painfully slowly and methodically, like a praying mantis

on a branch, his spindly limbs like bones painted brown.

My meal arrived on a stainless steel dish shaped like an over-designed hubcap for a mid-range family car, each asymmetrical indentation overflowing with food: white rice, lentil soup, chutney, spiced potatoes, chilli peppers, and chicken chunks in goo or ghee or something. It tasted delicious, but the chillies sandpapered my throat, causing me to cough.

‘Water, sir?’

All around me, innocents were drinking water but I knew that a blue cellophane wrapper around the bottle cap did not guarantee purity. Bottling plants in Nepal aren’t as regulated as they are in Leamington Spa. Cholera and giardiasis were only a sip away.

‘Tuborg, please.’

I was learning fast.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kathmandu closes at ten. Tired and tipsy, I walked back to my hotel through almost empty, shuttered streets. On the deserted track leading to my hotel I was accosted by a man who jumped out of the shadows, barring my way.

‘Father, my father. Help me.’

‘What’s the matter?’

‘Father, my father. My son is sick. He needs operation. I have no money.’

My first thought was that this was a scam, but as he continued to rant I began to believe him. His desperation was genuine. Fearing a poor rate of exchange at a streetside booth I had changed only a few pounds, and I handed the man the change in my pocket. Not much.

‘Father, my father. This is not enough. He will die.’

I didn’t care whether it was true or not, and – foolishly perhaps – I said, ‘Come back tomorrow. I will give you more.’