

ADVENTURE IN NEPAL – JUNGLE BY MISTAKE
Lost Somewhere in Nepal
August 24, 2010

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What happens when you mispronounce a name and end up left in a cow pasture with a five-foot pile of luggage watching your plane fly away? And then you manage to lose two of your children to a runaway cab driver. Here is the story.



This is a photo of one of my closest friends, Ngodup Burkhar, the well-known Tibetan/English translator and me. The monastery of the Ven. Bokar Rinpoche where he lived in Mirik, West

Bengal was where we thought we were headed. But pronouncing a single name wrong changed all that.



Photo: Nepal from the Air

What's In a Name?

While we arrived in Kathmandu (KTM) at the international airport, we knew little about the adjacent domestic airport from which we were about to fly from KTM to Bhadrapur, a tiny town in southeast Nepal, very close to the Indian border. From there, we planned to cross over into India at the dangerous border town of Karkavitta and on to Sikkim, where we were to visit some

of our Karma Kagyu dharma centers. All five of our family members had elected to go and when we arrived at the much smaller domestic airport, we managed to wrestle our own luggage away from the army of touts and pile it nearby the small office of the Royal Nepal Airlines, with whom we had tickets.

For the umpteenth time, we confirmed our tickets and managed to weigh our luggage and present it for inspection. As usual, the guards demanded we open up this bag or that one for inspection, only to tell us to forget it the moment we began to comply. I had no idea what kind of plane we would be on, only I suspected (from the size of this airport), it might not be a DC-10.

We waited for our flight to be called, with me checking every time any plane was boarded to make sure we were not somehow missing it. Finally, it was time to board and we climbed aboard the small bus that would drive us out to where the plane was waiting. And drive we did, progressively going farther and farther out, until we were at the very edge of the airport where it turned into fields, passing jets and larger transports, to pull up in front of a tiny propeller plane that seated maybe 16 people. Gulp.

The small hatchway of the plane had a 3 or 4 metal-rung ladder hanging down to the runway. Climbing on board, we wedged ourselves into the tiny wire-frame metal seats. The single flight attendant offered us a tray with cotton for our ears and a piece of candy to help us swallow. With the few people from the bus on board, the pilot climbed in and we took off at once.

I couldn't see much from the tiny porthole windows, but I could see the Kathmandu valley unfolding beneath us. In about an hour, we prepared to land. I looked hard to see the airport, but could see very little. We gradually dropped lower and lower. I still could see no runway, only a grassy field, which of course turned out to be the runway. People in the field chased cattle off the runway before us. Bumpity-bump, we finally came to a halt, swinging around in front of a small ochre-colored building with a bunch of people in front. Out we climbed.

It was very hot, steamy, and as my family watched the growing pile of our baggage being tossed from the back of the plane, I went to try and find a taxi to drive us the short distance from the airport to the Indian border town of Karkavitta, about half an hour's drive. I was hoping to find a driver who might take us across the border and all the way to Mirik, in West Bengal, to meet my friend and Tibetan translator Ngodup Burkhar. "How far to the Indian border?" I asked one driver?

Which border, he replied? Why the Indian border, of course. "It's a ten hour drive," he responded. Here was one confused taxi driver, I thought. The border is no more than one half-hour from here. "No," he said, "the Indian border and Karkavitta are at least 10 hours from here." I didn't get it.

This is Bhadrapur, is it not? "No, this is Bharitpur," he replied. "This is Western Nepal," which turned out to be some ten hours from the border and in quite the opposite direction from where

we thought we were going. I began to get excited and the airport attendant said, in his best Hindu-English accent, "Sir, there is no problem. I can stop the plane," which had begun to taxi away. "I have the authority to stop the plane." "Do stop it," I stammered. "We have to go back to Kathmandu right now!"

So much for that idea. The plane just took off and vanished into the shimmering heat, leaving us (along with five foot pile of baggage) standing in a field in one of the hottest parts of Nepal, actually near the edge of a tropical jungle. What a deserted feeling that was. The Royal Nepal Airlines ticket agent had misunderstood our destination and interpreted 'Bhadrapur' as 'Bharitpur'.



Photo: On the Road to the Jungle

After milling around with any number of Nepalese, all trying to speak English, which they could not, we were finally helped by a Brahmin, often the only Nepalese who really could speak English. There was very little we could do, he explained gently. We would have to wait at least one day for another plane. That was that. End of story. I looked around at the sad state of the town we were in. Twenty-four hours here?

Well, I refused to accept that fate, spending a night in this little sweatbox of a town and completely screwing up our trip, with people waiting (eventually worrying) for us to arrive later today at the other end. By God, I would rather spend the next 10 hours driving to the Indian border, arriving late that night, but getting on with our journey. I set about hiring two cars to drive us that great distance, since my family plus baggage were too much for any one taxi. We were then driven to the local Royal Nepal Airlines office, a one-room spot soon filled with onlookers ogling us.

We managed to find one middle-aged man with somewhat of a wreck of a taxi (who was willing to take us) and, after a while, a young Nepalese driver (who was the only one of the two who claimed to know English, which it turned out he did not) popped up with a very tiny, but newer vehicle. We were determined to go, if only to get out of where we were. I explained to both drivers what we were doing and that, at all times, we must keep each car in view of the other. We must always stay together. Yes, yes, they agreed. As we were starting out, the older driver had to stop at his house to get his license and a few other things. We waited out front. My wife, my young son, and myself went in the larger, older car, while my two daughters May and Michael Anne went in the smaller car with the young driver. Both cars were jammed with our luggage.



Photo: Houses Near the Jungle

Roads in Nepal

As we waited for the older driver, the younger driver kept motioning me from his car to take the wheel of the car I was in and just take off with the car and leave the older man. Funny guy, thought I. And as the driver came out with his license, the young driver started right off toward the nearest main road. We followed as soon as we could close the doors and get moving. Yet, when we reached the main street, there was no sight of the car with the girls. Looking to the right and left, we saw nothing. He had vanished and with him went my two daughters, aged 15 and 21. Just gone. Terrifying.

Well, we would have to catch up. Our driver took off in the correct direction, but we did not manage to catch sight of the other car, even after several miles. But I had told the young driver to stay in locked-step with us, I stammered to the older driver, who understood not one word. All he did was throw his hands up in a gesture of futility and say “young driver.” After one or two miles, I was still hopeful, but after ten and fifteen miles at quite a fast pace, I began to lose hope. Around this time, our driver began to swing into various filling stations and stores and ask if they had seen the other car. Nothing was forthcoming. I was getting quite upset at this point and began to be more vocal.

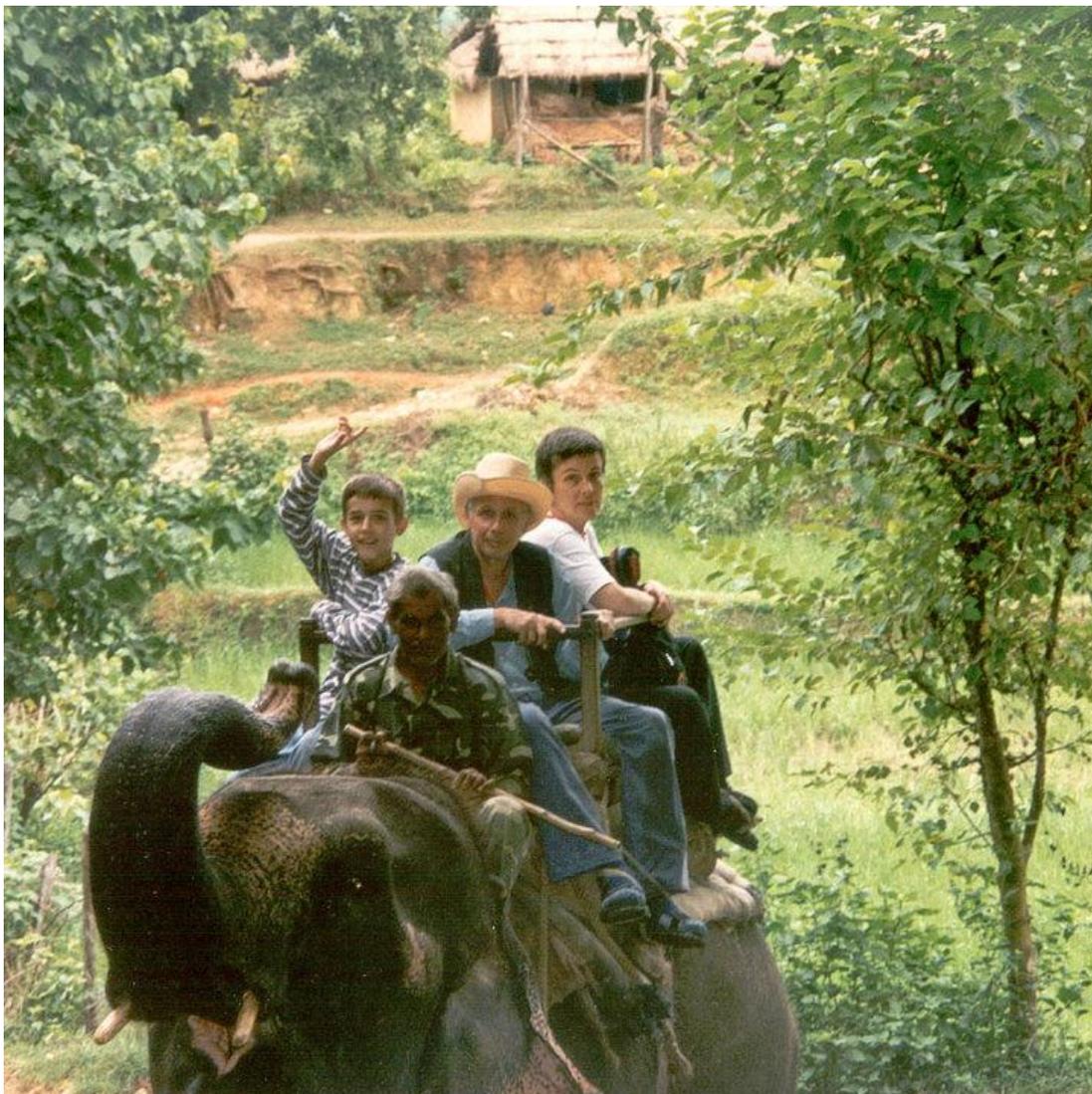
At some point, our driver just turned around and we began to head back to the town of Bharitpur and the Royal Airline Office. After what seemed an eternity, we arrived at the office and I rushed in and began to explain to the agent there. My wife wanted to contact the police at once, but the agent really didn't want to do that. He kept saying that we should get back on the road and keep driving and that, if after one hour of driving, we did not find the girls, then we should drive another hour back to his office and THEN he would go with us to the police. My wife was having none of that and she insisted we go to the police, NOW(!), which we did. Time kept slipping by, with well over an hour and a quarter having passed since we last saw the girls.

The police just went round and round, up and down the line of authority, with no real effect. We probably wasted a good 45 minutes in there before they insisted that we drive the one hour West along the road to the next town and that, if we did not find them, we were to call them from that town and they would institute a major search. In the meantime, they would call on ahead to the next town with the word. This was not really what we wanted, but we had little choice. We headed back out that same road we had traveled before, covering the same ground for the third time in what seemed like a kind of futile gesture.

On and on the road went, through incredible scenery – tall grasses along a large river, etc. Still we did not come to the town. After more than an hour, we were still going, looking in every filling station, every store, and there are nothing but stores along Nepalese roads. I was sick with worry by this point, running any number of horrible scenarios through my head. Then, some 54 miles down the road, there, by the side of the road was the car, the young driver, and our girls, all alive and well.

We were so relieved, but I was really pissed at the driver. The girls were worried, too, and did not want to ride with the young man any farther. Nothing much had happened. He had made eyes at them and otherwise had tried to impress them. And of course, he had paid no attention to our instructions. I spoke strongly to him. We decided that we could not conceive of trying to get this combination of cars, people, and drivers all the way across Nepal. We gave up and drove back the same damn road for the fourth time, all the way back to Bharitpur, where we would just have to hole up for the night. Our trip had ground to a halt. Seldom in my life has something stopped me so cold. I really understood the word 'frustrated'.

Back at the Royal Nepal Airline office, I fumed and spouted, refused to pay the young driver much of anything and arranged to find the most expensive hotel in town, which everyone warned me was way too expensive. It was called the Safari Hotel and rooms there were up to \$65 a night. It sounded like a deal to me and we packed up all our gear and girls and headed for the Safari.



Here we are heading out for the jungle early in the morning. That is me in the hat, my wife Margaret sitting next to me, and my son Michael Andrew up front. We were getting ready to cross a wide river with crocodiles waiting for anything to fall off.

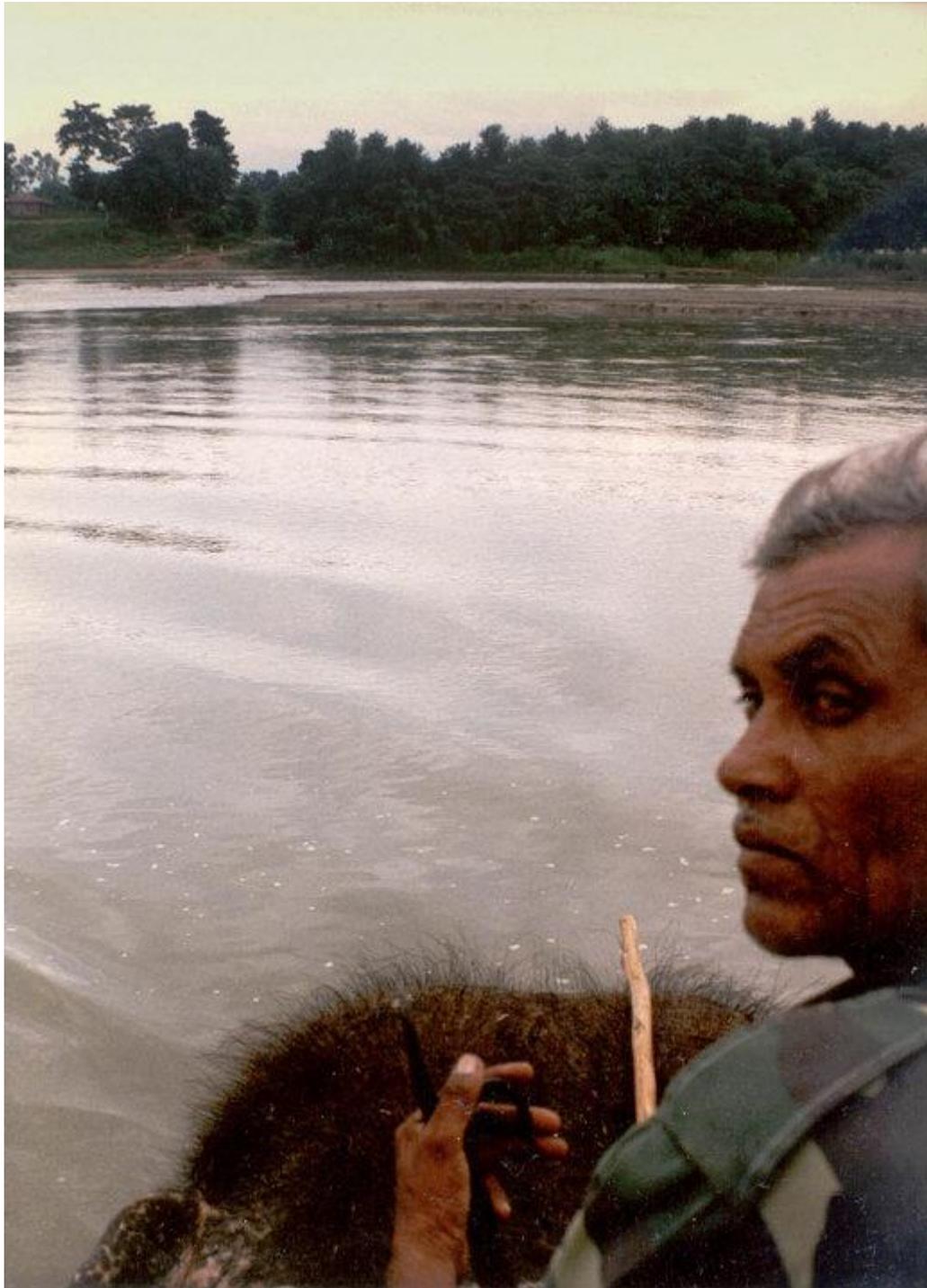


Photo: Crossing the Crocodile-infested River on Elephant

Well, the Safari turned out to be a huge resort, with a pool, a vast dining room, the works. After weeks of marginal hotels, we all hopped into the pool and cooled out. And cool was needed, for this was a tropical climate -- just plain hot. The entranceways and even some rooms had geckos (lizards with suction-cup toes) all over the walls, which were great fun to watch catch insects. As we (half starving) waited for dinner to be served at what seemed a very late 7:30 PM, we discovered that what the Safari was really all about was taking trips (safaris) into the nearby jungle, straddled atop an elephant. Since we had nothing to do, but wait for the next day's plane, we resolved to set off into the jungle on elephants the following morn, starting out for the jungle at an early 5:30 AM. It was our first non-pilgrimage act, but seemed like the right thing to do.



Entering the Jungle

And sure enough, at the crack of dawn there we were hurtling down back roads in an open jeep, heading toward the jungle. All around us were grass houses and shacks with people and animals, all starting their day. Everywhere along the road were flowers and plants, long roads filled with blossoms in the dawn light. We arrived at some kind of a hotel camp overlooking a large river, on the other side of which was the jungle. In the distance, we could see herds of deer or antelope moving along the jungle's edge. After being offered tea, we were guided down a path to a high landing where, one by one, several elephants moved in and allowed us to climb

into the wood-frame baskets securely mounted to their backs. It was four people to an elephant plus the elephant driver way up front.



The elephants walked right down to the river, drank their fill, and began to move out into the mainstream. The river was maybe a quarter mile wide. As the current got stronger, the elephants turned sidewise (facing the current) and began to sidestep toward the distant shore, which was a little scary. But, gradually, we crossed the expanse of the river, climbed up the other shore, and began to move into the jungle proper. It was good to be high up on the elephant because the grass we walked through (oddly enough, called 'elephant grass') was at least a good 5-6 feet high. There were tigers in this jungle and very few paths. It was a jungle.



Deep in the jungle, crossing streams, lurching, and steep banks where the poor elephant had to get down on its knees to work its way up the banks.



Photo: Making Trails Where There Were None

As we made our own trails, insects and leaves rained down from the foliage above. And the elephants would make this deep shuddering sound whenever they smelled something ahead of them in the jungle that they were not sure of. The steep-banked muddy narrow streams were forded, with the elephants often having to get down on their knees to climb up the other side, after making the crossing. I must say that it was an experience that I won't soon forget. I sure got close enough to a real jungle. On the way back, I saw a large crocodile eyeball us as we crossed the river. Not a time for swimming.



The short of it was that we saw all kinds of deer, wild boar, and, most important, wild rhinoceros. What an experience! Riding high up on the elephants, we walked right into a group of three rhinos -- a mom, pop, and 3-year old baby (not so much a baby anymore). There they were, just that close. And the elephants would leave the trails to crash on through the jungle itself, blazing new trails by tearing off limbs with their trunks and smashing foliage down with their feet.



After eating breakfast at the camp at the jungle's edge (playing with giant 6-inch millipedes that crawled over our hands and arms), being told to be careful on the camp paths because many had been killed by poisonous snakes on the edge of the paths.

We were back at the hotel by 10 AM, where we grabbed our bags and made it to the airport and stood in the heat. The Sun was fierce and I was soaked with sweat that later dried, actually leaving salt residue. At last an air-raid siren sounded to get the cattle off the runway, so that the plane could land. As the siren went off, boys with sticks swarmed onto the runway and drove the cattle and water buffalo back from the landing strip. The plane was able to land and we climbed aboard, stuffed cotton in our ears, and were on our way back to KTM to catch the correct plane to Bhadrapur, and not Bharitpur.

However, after this experience, our two girls elected to not go to India, but to spend the next

week in KTM, just doing whatever they felt like. We could not really blame them and, although we hated to be separated, said goodbye to them at the airport.

Back at Kathmandu, a dozen airline officials in three offices spent two hours of running around to get over their mistake and issue us new tickets. There we sat and waited, until we could finally climb aboard another cotton-in-your-ear propeller plane, this time hopefully on to Bhadrapur. From there we would cross by jeep into India and the bandit-city of Karkavitta, where we were warned never to slow down or stop, no matter what. But that is another story I will hopefully get to, our adventures in West Bengal, Sonada, Darjeeling, and Sikkim.