

## ***Letter from Mustang***

### **The Raja of Chortenistan**

By Daniel Glick

**T**here remains some dispute about which book - it was definitely in English - the young Tibetan was reading on that autumn day they all met in 1979. The Western travelers who observed the diminutive, moon-faced man sitting behind the counter of his Freak Street restaurant in Katmandu all have a different recollection. One is certain that it was Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Another swears it was a biography of Abraham Lincoln. A third recalls that the 23-year-old with a red-ochre complexion had been engrossed in David Bowie's life story. As for the object of speculation, Sherab Lhawang Lama, he does recall helping the American world travelers to a stoned late-night snack. He has no memory, however, of the book he held in his hand at that exact moment. He is certain, however, that he did read all three.

These divergent details emerged during a discussion 26 years later over a bottle of single malt Scotch imported from the Bangkok airport duty-free shop, as five men gathered in the elegant living room of one of the Americans, Keith Leslie, in Buddanilkanta, just north of Katmandu. After their first meeting in Sherab's Lost Horizon restaurant, Keith and Sherab had stayed in touch, via aerogramme, letter, and much later, email. They became friends, neighbors, raised young children together, and, ultimately, switched countries-of-residence. Keith, a Syracuse, New York native, made Nepal his home soon after that fateful 1979 meeting, married a Nepali, had three children, and has worked for Save the Children since 1984. Eight years ago, Sherab immigrated to North Carolina with his wife and two daughters and opened a Tibetan handicrafts shop.

In October 2004, Keith invited a group of old Himalayan hands to a reunion, offering to organize a trek to an almost mythical corner of northern Nepal called Mustang. One of them, Dave Ellenberg, had been present at that first Lost Horizon meeting, and another, Lance Dublin, had been in Katmandu at the same time and had also crossed paths with Keith, Dave and Sherab. Even though I was not part of the 1979 meeting and had never met Sherab, I was also invited to join the group because my friendship with Keith dated three decades, and I had traveled repeatedly to Nepal to visit him. Dave and Lance had also been friends of mine for 16 years: Dave and I co-owned a house together in Berkeley in the late 1980s, at the same time he was diagnosed with Hodgkins lymphoma; Lance was part of a loose-knit group of Himalayan travelers - we called ourselves "yaks" - whose center of gravity was the San Francisco Bay area in the late 1980s.

Mustang, a remote kingdom-with-a-kingdom north of the Annapurna Range, had loomed for decades in our travelers' imaginations like a grail, the same way Kashgar and Kalimantan, Timbuktu and Tasmania, Ulan Bator and Uzbekistan beckoned: it was remote, difficult to access, swathed in mystery and legend. Despite a new road the Chinese had built from the Tibetan border to Mustang's capital Lo Manthang, most of Mustang remained a place where the 19<sup>th</sup> century had barely made an entrance - much less the cacophony of the 21<sup>st</sup>. Peter Mattheisson had

passed through lower Mustang while researching *The Snow Leopard*, a bible we had carried tattered over 17,000-foot mountain passes in our 20s. Mustang's landscapes were vast, its history marked by geopolitical intrigue, and its artistic treasures matched the achievements of any culture, anywhere. The salt trade spur of the Silk Road has passed that way; Buddhism traveled Mustang's dusty paths up from the Gangeatic plains to the Tibetan plateau en route to Mongolia and Japan. As a bonus, Mustang had yet to be overrun by the *Lonely Planet* crowd, since it had only received a relative trickle of Western trekkers since it opened in 1992 to visitors, partly owing to a requirement to purchase expensive trekking permits.

As Keith conceived it, the impetus for this trek was both vague and expansive, as befitted the Asian style that had in one way or another attracted us repeatedly to the continent over the decades: we were all teetering on either side of our 50th birthdays, and Keith challenged us to take time from our work and our families to rediscover the spirit that had sent each of us wandering around the world for years during our 20s in a post-Jimmy-Carter-malaise, post-Watergate crisis of confidence that had seized many of our generation. Keith's email invitation to all of us, quoting T.S. Eliot, struck like a too-loud alarm clock: "How briefly the day passes. How long ago we first met. How distant our marriages. How rapidly our children age. How suddenly our hair grays, recedes or thins. ('Do I dare to eat a peach?')"

We all pondered a litany of reasons not to answer his exhortation. Taking nearly a month off from jobs and parenting seemed insurmountable on its face. Crossing eleven time zones with just days to recover before marching over a slew of two-and-a-half mile high passes felt like a younger man's game. We fretted over Nepal's precarious political situation, exacerbated since King Gyanendra had dissolved the parliament in February; civil unrest, student protests and Maoist massacres had even made the pages of the *New York Times*. Though we were veterans of year-of-living-dangerously travel (notably including Keith and Dave's trip from Iran into Afghanistan just after the Iranian Revolution and as the Russians were invading Kabul), none of us felt much affinity for such risk these days. Keith assured us that the bloody Maoist revolution that had gripped Nepal for the past decade might as well be happening in a different country. Mustang had its own set of challenges, including being an anachronistic Tibetan Buddhist kingdom subsumed by a larger, unstable Hindu monarchy and surrounded on two sides by Chinese-controlled Tibet. But no *Maobadi*.

Prufrock's words resounded again, as we each responded in the affirmative for an August 2005 trek: "Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'/Let us go and make our visit."

**U**nknown to me at the time, Sherab had a private quest that he only slowly revealed to us. Even though we were regaled daily by astonishing sights -- like the medieval scene of three dozen village women migrating on foot to help a neighboring town with the barley harvest, or the sight of daredevil bareback horsemen racing through muddy streets at a full gallop trying to pick up a scarf from the ground during a midsummer festival -- Sherab's story would unfold as one of the most interesting and memorable of our journey.

He was the only one among us who had been to upper Mustang, I soon learned. Born in 1957 in a Tibetan nomad's tent just north of Lo Manthang three years after Mao Tse-Tung famously told the young Dalai Lama that religion was "poison," Sherab's family fled in 1959 after the Chinese invaded and prompted the momentous Tibetan exodus into Nepal, India and beyond. Sherab's yak-herding clan headed into the high valleys of northern Mustang as he began his epic life's journey - leading him to Nepali refugee camps in Pokhara, schools in India, work in the Tibetan government-in-exile with the Dalai Lama in Dharmasala, a stint translating Tibetan folk tales for a German professor in Bonn, travels around Asia and Europe as a personal secretary to the Sharmapa (spiritual head of the Karma Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism), marriage to a Catholic Chinese-American woman raised in Chowchilla, California, and his current incarnation as a shopkeeper at Himalayan Frontiers in Raleigh's Triangle Town Center mall.

Sherab had not been back to Mustang since 1980, the year after his fateful meeting with the young American wanderers in the restaurant he co-owned with his eldest brother. Deng Xiaoping had instituted the "Open Door Policy," and Tibetans were at last free to return across the border for visits. Sherab and his brother retraced the steps he had been carried over as a toddler, traveling through Mustang to Lo Manthang. There, Raja Jigme Palbor Bista, Mustang's 25th king dating back to late 14th century (and a friend of Sherab's uncle), loaned them horses. They rode two days north of the border to return to their native village and an emotional homecoming, touching foreheads in the traditional greeting and going from tent to tent drinking yak butter tea.

The two brothers returned again to their birthplace, via Lhasa, in 1994. During that trip, relatives and townspeople asked the brothers a favor they could not refuse: to refurbish the local gumpa - a Buddhist temple -- that had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

Now, in 2005, heading back to Mustang, our arduous twelve-day trek up and down the farthest reaches of the Kali Gandaki River valley would challenge all of us both physically and mentally. Sherab had the added onus - not quite the One Ring's burden -- of executing a secret delivery of consecrated religious paintings and cash to fulfill his family's duty. We would tacitly join his quest, and on the way the five of us would create an unexpected and poignant connection: The Fellowship of the Chorten.

**I**n an auspicious sign before I left for Nepal, another old friend, Broughton Coburn, had phoned me from his home in Wyoming about a month earlier. He said he was also going to Nepal, funded by the National Geographic Expeditions Council, to scout a first descent of the upper Kali Gandaki River. Brot, as he is known, had lived in Nepal for nearly two decades, worked on development projects bringing hydro- and solar electricity to remote villages, was past-president of the American Himalayan Foundation, and had authored a book commemorating the 50th anniversary of the first successful summit of Everest. He had been to Mustang several times, and off-handedly told me he had plans to trek to Lo Manthang with his family, leaving Katmandu on the same date we planned to begin our adventure. They had precisely five seats left in their twin-engine Otter

charter, which we gratefully accepted, that would take us directly from Katmandu to Jomson. From there, we would begin our trek from an elevation of 9,500 feet on our way over several 13,500 passes to Mustang's walled capital city, situated at 12,500 feet. If our paths crossed in Lo Manthang, Brot offered to introduce us to the Italian art restorers whom we heard had been working for five years to clean and renovate the stunning Buddhist paintings at the Thubchen Lhakang, a 15th-century temple, which rivaled the Sistine Chapel in grandeur and scope. We were already carrying gifts for the Italians as well as greetings from mutual friends, and we welcomed the offer.

Keith had hired a trekking company owned by a Nepali friend (in our dirt-bag traveling days the relative extravagance would have been unthinkable), and they arranged our permits (\$700 for a ten-day trek), which we later heard were deposited in the Nepali kleptocracy rather than having a portion funneled back into Mustang as the government had initially agreed. If the monsoon rains permitted, our direct charter would allow us to skirt places where recent Maoist activity would have made passage dicier.

Departure day dawned clear, and we embarked on our Cosmic Air flight on a perfect blue Himalayan morning, flying along the northern edge of the Katmandu Valley with views of the Ganesh Himal, the Annapurnas, Dhaulagiri and the vast expanses of the Gangeatic plains to our south. Boyish grins of excitement swept our faces as we scanned the unfathomably vast horizon, flying at 12,000 feet and staring up nearly another three miles to the snow-sheened peaks.

Dave, Keith and Lance had all been to Jomson during their first visits to Nepal, since most trekkers heading to the classic Annapurna trek had to walk from Pokhara and pass through Jomson either before or after crossing the famed Thorong La pass. The sight of the airstrip, now paved, with nearby ATM machines and Internet cafes (as well as donkeys walking the stone paver streets) was a shock. Even though there was no connecting road linking Jomson with any thoroughfare, we were equally taken aback by the clamor of motorcycles and the sight of a tractor filled with rocks moving along the short stretch of road that had been built linking one end of town to the other. Prosperity and progress with a distinctly Nepali twist: a road to nowhere, flanked by prayer flags and mud-walled buildings topped by a single photovoltaic solar panel.

We met our trekking guides, who had walked up from near Pokhara, and the team of young Nepali cooks and porters who would take splendid care of us for the next two weeks. After a leisurely breakfast at Om's Home, one of a multiplying number of lodges and restaurants that had mushroomed in the 25 years since everybody's first visit, we started walking.

Even here, we saw reminders of a country in escalating strife. Just as the presence of camouflage-clad troops at checkpoints around Katmandu had been unsettling, the army garrison outside the Jomson airport reminded us that the Maobadi had carved a deep streak of fear across the country. The army checkpoint at Jomson was for us, white tourists, a mere formality to ensure we had paid our first set of trekking fees to enter the Annapurna conservation zone. But Sherab was interrogated and had to surrender his Nepali passport (he slyly told us he had

retained it as well as his American passport), which he would be able to retrieve upon our return.

We crossed the Kali Gandaki River on a footbridge, left the relative civilization of a Nepali middle hills airport town, and headed north at the leisurely pace of around two miles per hour, not counting stops for tea, for vista-viewing, for resting sweaty on rock benches placed strategically along steep ascents. The five of us fell into line, then split into pairs and trios and solo segments, beginning a daily habit of walking and talking five to eight hours a day about an eclectic range of topics: Buddhist iconography and the legacy of the Gorkha conquest of Mustang; the charms of the Indian actress Aishwarya Rai and the perils of contemporary Israeli politics; the best film lines of all time ("I'm walkin' heah!") and the relative poetic merits of Bob Dylan versus Bruce Springsteen; lost loves of our lives and the provenance of saligrams (100 million-year-old fossils revered by Hindus because they bear the resemblance of one of the six hands of the god Vishnu) that we would find encased in round, black stones along the river bed.

The landscape unfolded in slow-motion, a high-desert valley cleaved in two by the Kali Gandaki floodplain, emanating from the high Himalas surrounding us en route to the river's confluence with the Ganges and terminus in the Bay of Bengal. The countryside was oddly familiar to me, reminiscent of the American West where I live, a combination of the sedimentary red-rock palate of southern Utah and the desiccated Toiyabe ranges rising from the Great Basin in Nevada. The spaces are grandiose, the cloud-dappled light searingly clear, the sense of enormity pervasive and humbling.

We made an odd *équipe*: four white guys, each of us hovering at around six feet, and the 5'3" inch Sherab, baby-faced Sherab, whose Asian whiskers would only grow in a sparse clump around his chin and would not give him the same grizzled look that we Caucasians sported after a couple days. He wore a yellow Lance Armstrong wristband and a beige felt, broad-brimmed hat at all times, and spoke with all the Tibetan travelers we passed. I felt drawn to walk with him, eliciting his layered life story and his reactions to all that he was witnessing, repeatedly struck by how he was looking at the same landscape as I was but was seeing the same scenes through a vastly different lens.

As we walked, we would trade pieces and stories of our lives: how Sherab and I had kids of almost identical ages: mine, a boy 17 and a girl 13, and he two girls who were 17 and 12. I had divorced six years ago and was raising my kids as a single father; he had married Soilan after she had lost her American boyfriend in a climbing accident. Suddenly, as we walked past a set of copper-colored prayer wheels announcing our entrance to a village with whirling "Om Mani Padme Hums," he would stop and gaze around as if trying to orient himself. "I remember this," he would say softly, almost as he had been there during a previous incarnation, which in a way he was. Then he would begin the regular stabbing of his ski pole walking stick, punctuating every other step - and his stories -- with a rhythmic click.

He was the youngest of five children (his oldest brother is 15 years his senior), but grew up without any memory of his father, who had died while trying to tame a wild horse when Sherab was an infant. His mother had come under the protection of Sherab's uncle, who helped them across the border when news of the



Kuomintang's rout by the Communists brought great uncertainty. "Everything was in a commotion and nobody really was sure what was going on," says Sherab. Some Tibetan warrior-class Khampas coming from the east had become bandits, the Chinese army was a clear and present danger, and many nomads fled to safety in upper Mustang.

After a few years trying to resume their herding life in Nepal, the family's yaks and sheep fled back across the now-closed border to Tibet and Sherab's clan moved into Lo Manthang. "We thought things would return to normal in a few years," he says. "But it never did."

Around 1962, Tibetan refugee camps had been established in Pokhara, a week's walk down the valley - and Sherab's family traveled the path from Lo Manthang and back "three or four times before I can even remember." His first English teacher was an American Peace Corps volunteer in Pokhara. When Sherab was eight, his mother died and he was chosen to go to school - St. Joseph's -- in Dharamsala, India. With his brother, they walked to the Indian border and were sent off in a DC-9.

The transit school was a collection of orphans and a few relatively well-off students. "We were fortunate and had our own clothes," Sherab recalls. When one destitute boy appropriated Sherab's sweater, he went to the teacher in charge and demanded that the boy give it back. The teacher said, "It's up to you."

Sherab thinks that because he let the boy keep the sweater, he was marked for a dubious leadership challenge. After a young boy died in the dormitory, Sherab was chosen, along with his brother and two others, to cremate the body, which had been stuffed into a small cardboard box. A man in a jeep drove them 20 miles away, left them with the corpse, a bundle of wood, a jug of kerosene and some sugar, but without instructions as to what they should do. At first they decided to eat the sugar and leave the body, but ultimately they managed to light the fire (the sugar helped the kerosene burn). He recalls prodding the belly, which was not burning, as it exploded in a burst of grotesque tapeworms. They had to hitchhike back to the school, stopping in a city to sneak into a black-and-white Hindi movie - Sherab's first.

He was then chosen for a private English school in Mussoorie, in India's north, run by an Irish-Indian man and populated by Thais, Tibetans, Kenyans and a collection of other hand-picked, displaced students. He was then enrolled into a Jesuit high school in Kalimpong, in western India, where a Swiss man Sherab never met became his "godfather." The Swiss man sponsored Sherab's education, but died before Sherab could meet him. Still, the man left money for Sherab's university education, and he ultimately went to Calcutta University in West Bengal, where he received a graduate degree in business management - the first Tibetan to do so. After graduating, a 15-minute scheduled meeting for Sherab and his best school chum with the Dalai Lama turned into "almost like a pep talk," Sherab recalls. His Holiness spoke to the boys for more than an hour, "half warning, half scolding, half advice," and sent them off to "Be good."

Sherab was sent to manage an Indian Tibetan refugee camp for a few years, but became ill and returned to Katmandu to recuperate at his brother's house around 1978. Katmandu had joined the burgeoning world-traveler circuit, the

trekking business was exploding, and Freak Street came "alive with all those hippies," Sherab recalls. The two brothers opened Lost Horizon restaurant, featuring "Tibetan pizza," and hoped to cater to Westerners who needed food while searching for cheap hash and eastern mysticism on the fly. Although Sherab didn't smoke, by the time he met Dave, Keith and Lance, he had already experienced many a contact high. "We got second-hand stoned every evening," he recalls with an impish grin.

The traveling trio of Keith, Dave and Lance intrigued Sherab, as he watched them carrying "more books than were in the Katmandu library," and talking about the subcontinent's history, religions and cultures with passionate interest. Lance, five years older than the others, had already retired from his first career, as a dean and provost of Antioch College West, and Keith and Dave were fairly recent college grads whose curiosity had sent them like dry sponges out into the world.

These unusual travelers provided a window into the American culture that Sherab would eventually embrace. Ironically, it was partly the Americans' interest in all things Buddhist and Hindu and Nepali that intrigued Sherab - and initiated his own spiritual quest to study the Dharma - Buddha's teachings. If Keith, Dave and Lance were in some ways Jews looking for the Lotus, Sherab the Lotus was also checking out the Jews.

**O**n our first night of the trek we reached Kagbeni, a prosperous village and a fork in the road: to the east, Muktinath, one of Hinduism's holiest pilgrimage sites. To the west, Dolpo, land of *The Snow Leopard*. To the north the expanse of upper Mustang unfolded to our eyes like a 3-D topographic map, with successive layers of mountainous horizon sliced by river drainages running milk-white in the monsoon's sweat. The next morning, we passed another checkpost after showing our Mustang permits and felt like we were truly launched on our adventure to the land of Lo, as the Tibetans called it.

When Nepal unified in the 1700s, Mustang was targeted as the new country's northernmost border. Lo had been an independent kingdom since the mid-15th century, but the Gorkha army conquered it in 1789. Mustang became absorbed by the emerging Nepali-state. Lo maintained a semi-autonomous condition, persisting with its strong cultural and ethnic ties to Tibet, until the Chinese invasion in 1959. Many Tibetan resistance fighters, some trained by the CIA, retreated into Mustang as a base of operations. HMG, His Majesty's Government (of Nepal) restricted foreigners' access to Mustang but turned a blind eye to the resistance. Then, with the Nixon-to-China détente of the early 1970s, Nepal's harboring of the Khampas became a liability. The U.S. leaned on HMG, and the Royal Nepal Army came at the Khampas from the south, eventually prevailing after the CIA sold out the Khampa general they had previously supported. HMG jailed the general in Katmandu.

It wasn't until 1992 and the incipient days of Nepal's parliamentary democracy when the "last forbidden kingdom" opened to foreigners willing to fork over \$70 a day plus trekking company fees in order to see what was billed as an authentic piece of old Tibet. The Dalai Lama almost immediately sent an envoy to check in on this lost tribe of Tibetans in the Land of Lo, soon followed by scholars,

art restorers, Tibetophiles, a "YakDonalds" in Kagbeni, and curious wanderers like us.

North of Kagbeni, at almost every turn, every pass, and every tiny village, we passed chorten (also known as stupa) in various shapes and sizes: simple piles of rocks and elaborate earthenware-colored edifices built to protect wayfarers and embody prayers, often topped by a prayer flag or ceremonial scarf called a kata. One of the oldest known forms of Buddhist architecture, chortens typically have a square base symbolizing the earth, a dome representing water, and thirteen steps symbolizing fire. At the top is a shape invoking the wind, and some sort of architectural nod to the sun and moon. Some chortens contain religious artifacts or relics that commemorate some religious act or powerful place. "It's a way of making a secular landscape sacred," said Keith, in response to my incredulous question about why there were so many chortens here. "And there's a whole lotta sacred going on."

Any time we trudged up a 13,500-foot pass or dropped into a valley (there are no flat trails in Nepal, we reminded ourselves) and felt momentarily like we were in a wilderness, we were abruptly reminded, by a chorten dressed in prayer flags, or cliffside caves that had been inhabited since at least 800 B.C., that our path was an ancient one. Some chortens were mere piles of rocks topped by a flapping white flag, and we joined in constructing them by tossing a stone into the pile as we passed, which theoretically granted us some measure of merit. The ubiquity of the structures inspired us to christen the country "Chortenistan."

The trails stretched out to the horizon in what seemed like limitless, Sisyphean effort. None of us were first-ascent mountaineering types, but at least we had all traveled hundreds of miles on foot in our lifetimes. Our collective muscle memory may have saved us, since various iterations of paunch were indeed upon us. Even Sherab's windswept plateau birthright and lineage he could trace to a Mongol Chieftain family that settled in Tibet in 1688 did not preclude him from the perils of middle age. He had put on the most weight of all of us, and Keith kidded him for resembling a "sauji," or wealthy, portly man.

At the end of our second day, Sherab felt sick, vomited, and lay inert in a small lodge where we had eaten our dinner. Our *sirdar*, or trekking leader, expressed concern that Sherab might be suffering from altitude sickness, even though we were at a relatively low 12,000 feet. We fed him broth and Diamox (an altitude-sickness drug), and he slept in the lodge rather than in our customary tents. In the morning Sherab pronounced himself well enough to continue.

We had a string of mules and one rideable horse, which Sherab mounted. We all commented on his regal stature, displaying his genetic coding from one of the world's great horse cultures. The king of Mustang, whom other visitors had told us had become a sad, powerless *raja* who was fading away, had nothing on Sherab. From then on, Sherab channeled the Raja of Chortenistan; the five of us comprised the fellowship of the chorten, supporting Sherab as he clandestinely transported seven ornately-painted *thankas* (Buddhist paintings) and 50,000 Chinese Yuan - about \$6,000 -- rolled up inside the paintings.

Though we were all American citizens, our fellowship was decidedly not a Mayflower club: only four of our collective twenty grandparents had been born in



the United States. Our own lives had mirrored the great theme of globalization that characterized our epoch: Lance, like me, had lived in East Africa as a kid; both of us had parents whose work took them to Tanzania and Uganda, respectively. He had married a Thai woman; I married a Dutch woman whose family immigrated to Hawaii; both of us were divorced. Dave's wife, while a full-blooded New Mexican, nonetheless had grown up in Japan. Sherab and Keith had both formed intercultural unions and were rearing bicultural children.

When we native-born sons had each left America to see the world in our early 20s, we had pursued separate itineraries in the Freddy-Laker-to-London, Icelandic-Air-to-Luxembourg times: Keith had roomed with a high-school friend of mine at Amherst, and when the two of them graduated they scattered to the trade winds and neither returned: our mutual friend Scott Leiper married a Khmer woman and settled in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

At one point in late 1978, Keith split up with Scott and met Dave to travel overland from Istanbul, crossing the Iranian border into Afghanistan just after the Iranian Revolution brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power in early 1979. Lance, traveling alone, had left India heading west, reaching the Afghani border from Pakistan at almost the same time the Russians invaded in December. I, also alone, had hitchhiked from Athens to Thessaloniki. But instead of turning east towards Teheran, Baghdad and Kabul, I headed up the Dalmatian Coast of Yugoslavia and embarked on a season as a migrant farm worker in the south of France -- and didn't make it to the Far East until five years later.

We were long-distance, long-dimension travelers: Lance finished a 1,000-day voyage; my honeymoon lasted three years traveling and working in Asia; Dave wandered for a year-and-a-half; Keith never returned. Like travelers will, our world-traveling cabal would meet occasionally, sometimes on purpose and sometimes through serendipity, inside a stone hut tea shop on the Everest trek, at a thatched coconut frond bungalow complex in the south of Thailand, at the field of temples in Pagan, Burma, on a boat from Chongqing heading down the Yangtze River. We were all devouring Hesse and Kerouac, VS Naipual, Graham Greene, Eric Newby and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

And then, something obvious happened for such sons of American privilege. We all made our devils' bargains with ambition, returned to school or found mates, had our children and watered them with care. Dave survived chemo and cancer, had two beautiful girls and embraced his good fortune with joyful fatalism. Keith married a Thakali woman from the southern reaches of Mustang, and, in the manner of his wit that would have Lance dub him the "Jerry Seinfeld of Nepal," proceeded to have what he maintains are the world's first "Jewkalis," a mix of his Jewish roots and Shakun's tribal heritage. He chose development work, Dave became a middle school teacher, Lance a management consultant who rode the Internet boom and bust to within a hair's breadth of a multi-million dollar payout, and I a journalist.

By far, however, Sherab's path from nomad to North Carolinian was the most circuitous. Details of his journey would only leak out in drops unless he was prodded to talk about himself. Almost as an afterthought, he'd mention that he spent a year living at Syambunath, one of Katmandu's most famous temples (with the famous painted eyes), or that he'd been to Singapore, Hong Kong, the Philippines,

Malaysia and Thailand with the Sharmapa. I asked him what the Tibetans we met on the trail thought of him, dressed in Western clothes and coming from America. He said that he didn't mention that part. "They might think I'm bragging," he said. Dressed in nylon pants and a rust-colored windbreaker, a woman approached him for money. "Big brother, give me 100 rupees (about a dollar and a half)," she asked in Tibetan. He replied, "How can a man dressed in plastic have 100 rupees?" She laughed, he laughed, we walked on.

The quintet of pilgrims walked, talked, rambled and gawked: at hanging glaciers peeking around cumulus, at the scent of wild mint and juniper, at the turns of our lives. We crossed over steep passes into the mist and the clouds, peering ahead to a darkened and ominous horizon. "This is Frodo country," Keith almost whispered. Sherab dismounted from his horse, declared he was feeling better, and brought us back to earthy reality. "Riding makes me too horny."

The days proceeded with a reassuring rhythm. We awoke early in our tents to the sahib's life on the trail: the call of "Good Morning, Sir. Bed tea." Freed from the constraints of sending kids off to school and quotidian chores, we greeted the days in buoyant moods, beginning with belly-laughes about each others' snoring and nocturnal high-altitude flatulence. We recounted the travelers' dream-vivid night, chided Sherab for his strict adherence to Soilan's admonition to maintain his dental hygiene - and chuckled at the humming of his battery-powered toothbrush, incongruous against the clanging background of wandering goatherds' collar-bells. On our third day, we broke camp and left the village of Samar to visit the holy Rangchuyung Cave, whose name means "the chorten that formed itself," home of the "self-emanating Buddha." A steep morning climb, followed by a steep morning descent before we turned up a narrow side canyon only to climb again to the prayer-flag draped cave entrance.

A 75-year-old monk, whom Sherab alone among us can talk with, greets us. He had been a wandering monk in India and various parts of Nepal until he came here a few years back and decided to stay. Over time, neighboring villagers and pilgrims came to help him, bringing rice and firewood, building an enclosed sleeping space, tidying up the area and building steps. Inside the cave, we saw several large stalagmites that look like chortens, and Buddha carvings inside little niches that by legend appeared mystically - hence the "self-emanating" moniker. The aging monk climbed nimbly around the cave with us, explaining the nuances of various holy objects. "He says he will probably kick the bucket here," Sherab says, debriefing us as we make an offering and bid our farewells.

I had noticed Sherab muttering prayers and prostrating himself during our cave visit, and asked if he had ever been a monk. He laughed. His nomadic youth and Jesuit education hadn't really offered much chance to study the Dharma. In fact, by the time Sherab started working for a German professor who was studying Tibetan culture when Sherab was already nearly 25, he realized how much he didn't know about the basic tenets of Tibetan Buddhism.

After his trip with his brother to Mustang in 1980, he had become more curious about his own culture and religion, which was coincidentally spreading into the West, aided by the elevated role the Dalai Lama was playing on the world stage (he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989) and the Tibetan diaspora. When the

Sharmapa offered Sherab a job as a personal secretary, he leaped at the chance, traveling to Greece, Germany and France as well as throughout Southeast Asia - and Sherab's first trip to the U.S., to New York in 1982. The travels ultimately offered a chance to listen to the Sharmapa's teachings and begin a personal study of Tibetan history and Buddhist philosophy.

He met Soilan in Katmandu and they married in 1986, which allowed Soilan to stay in Nepal. When she was pregnant with their first child Rinchen, she returned to the U.S. for the birth before returning to Katmandu. The young family lived near Keith and his wife, Shakun, and raised their young children together. Sherab ran Tibet Kitchen, a restaurant in the traveler-trendy Thamel district, and Soilan worked for the Asia Foundation. Their second daughter, Dechen, was born in 1993. In 1994, Sherab returned to Tibet with his brother and took on the task of raising money to refurbish the Tradun monastery. They met with various monks and abbots, formed a committee, and tried to move forward without incurring the wrath of the Chinese, who were slowly relaxing their strict hold on Tibetan religion and were allowing reconstruction of various monasteries and gompas. Overwhelmed by the prospect of fundraising, the brothers were surprised when much of what they needed fell into their laps from what Sherab calls "an anonymous South African donor." He is cagey with me about the source of the money and any possible involvement of the Tibetan government-in-exile. "It is all so sensitive," Sherab says.

Eventually, Sherab and his family emigrated to the U.S. in 1997. They settled on North Carolina by accident, after a friend of a friend told Soilan about a job with the state department of commerce. Sherab says he preferred to move to Montana to "raise a ranch or something like that." Instead, he opened Himalayan Frontiers in late 1998, selling incense and Tibetan chests, Buddhist art and bronze sculptures of deities. He also co-founded the non-profit Himalayan Society, which may be his way of promoting the meeting of the secular and the sacred in his adoptive home.

Two days' walk later, we sat for hours at the top of the last pass before descending into Lo Manthang. "I am from beyond those mountains," Sherab said quietly, staring at the Tibetan horizon rolling out past the walled city. The pink brush-swath of nearly-ripe buckwheat fields - almost the color of cherry blossoms -- dotted the valley below, and the giant, vermilion monastery stood out from the beige and brown of the town's walls. Bright lemon-yellow mustard fields accented the green of the barley, an irrigation-inspired miracle of high-desert agriculture set among dun-colored hills.

With the afternoon wind billowing up the Kali Gandaki from the plains, we descended to the capital and were greeted by a yak-herder hurling stones at his recalcitrant flock. Sherab, clearly pleased to see his family's former *métier* in practice, nonetheless had yet another unanticipated reaction -- to the herder's style. "He doesn't have to throw the rocks so hard to make them obey," Sherab said, shaking his felt hat in disapproval.

Afternoon rains had turned the dirt lane into a series of mud puddles, and Sherab was immediately aghast when he saw the new building all around the exterior of the massive city walls, which were being repaired with from sun-baked bricks coated with mud plaster. "None of this was here," he said, clearly disappointed by the poor urban planning. A group of young men foisted newly-

printed business cards in bad English upon us (they did take Visa and MasterCard) and implored us to visit their curio shops, which Sherab noted seemed to contain the same beaded baubles that were sold cheaper and were of better quality in Katmandu.

We set up camp, and spotted Brot with his family through the window of the Italian restorers' homes. They beckoned to us, and Brot introduced us to Luigi Fieni, who immediately offered us espresso. We delivered our offerings of a Bardolino and a Valpollicella, which Luigi embraced with passionate kisses. The next day we were given the tour of what we soon learn is an enormously intricate, laborious, and controversial restoration of what has to be one of the world's greatest expressions of early Renaissance religious art in any denomination. Thanks to generator-powered movie lighting left behind by a film crew, Luigi illuminated the walls he and a team of Italians and locals had been cleaning and retouching for years, removing layers of yak butter smoke, repairing rain damage, and unveiling bright walls of mandalas and rows of Sakyamunis that had been obscured from view.

Brot, who had written about the restoration, tells us that the Thubchen Gompa is dedicated to Sakyamuni, Buddha of The Present. The restoration uncovered paintings in ancient hues of turquoise, malachite, cinnamon and gold that had been lost behind crumbling walls. Their efforts included repairing the roof, shoring up walls, and painstaking removal of the centuries' indignities. The source of conflict among some Loba, Sherab learns, is that the European philosophy of restoration that Luigi and his group adhere to does not include repainting areas that have been completely destroyed. They have been retouching some areas with slight damage, but have steadfastly refused locals' request to imagine what used to be on the many wall sections where the plaster had fallen completely. "We don't know what was there," Luigi says, with a shrug of frustration.

What has been revealed and restored is jaw-dropping. Thirty-foot high walls perhaps sixty feet long are filled with bright colors depicting epic stories and struggles, tantric frescoes, the five Buddhas displaying different mudras, and Dakinis, skywalking Himalayan fairies. We walk from wall to wall, floor to floor, with Sherab trailing behind and reading the prayers written in Tibetan script, explaining the significance of a gesture ("this is the Maitraya, or future Buddha") or retelling the picture story about the lion-headed manifestations of the Lotus-Born and other Buddhist esoterica.

Sherab is Western enough to understand the Italians' restoration philosophy, but seems to have little patience for it. To Loba, or the people of Lo, the argument that they should leave the painting of a protector deity or *bodhisattva* incomplete because it might offend somebody's 21st century artistic sensibilities is a useless Western concept. "They did not paint them for art," Sherab insisted. "They painted them for religion. The people restoring them cannot understand that."

Nonetheless, we were thrilled with the private tour, and spent the next few days revisiting the gompa and wandering around Lo Manthang's labyrinthine, medieval, excrement-laced muddy streets, marveling at the contrast between the wealth of a former civilization that spawned such high art and the decay and relative

indolence of the present. Apparently the town's electricity system has been down for months, and Brot is helping to troubleshoot while we all wonder why nobody else seems to have even tried. We watched the king's horseback procession to celebrate the mid-summer *Yartung*, and saw the men of the town race their horses to a collection of tents on the mountainside, where the afternoon was spent drinking *chang*, or barley beer. We followed the townspeople on foot, and watched the king sit alone in his ornate tent while the others got hammered. "So sad," Sherab says, of the aging king, whom Sherab learned was not even powerful enough to curtail the building around the city walls and whose relatives had sold valuable parcels of land to each other for a pittance. Sherab motions for us to leave. "Leave them to their privacy."

We were invited to have lunch the next day by an old friend of Sherab's, Amchi Tenzing, a monk, doctor, and moving force to build up a traditional Tibetan medical school. Amchi Tenzing is also one of the conduits for the thankas and money that Sherab was delivering.

More precisely, had already delivered. Unknown to us, Sherab had dropped off his precious cargo the previous day. It had been immediately spirited away by a monk from Sherab's hometown monastery, who had come to Lo Manthang disguised as a truck driver. Sherab knew the monk, handed over the goods, no receipts exchanged. "We have to channel this quietly," he said, explaining why he hadn't wanted us along for the delivery. "Once it's in the hands of the local people, nobody will ask questions."

I asked why the thankas are so important, and Sherab explained that they are a sort of "moveable, transportable blackboard" to teach the Dharma, akin to illustrated Bible stories. "Most of the oral traditions are passed through illustrations," he says.

The morning of our lunch, Amchai Tenzing had received a phone call ("Chinese cell phones are very, very useful," Sherab chuckled) confirming that the thankas and the money had arrived safely. "The timing was amazing," says Sherab. "There is a mystery in that."

After the delivery had been confirmed, Sherab seem lighter, relieved of his burden and duty. "As soon as the thankas were in the other monk's hands, it was like, 'Mission Accomplished,'" he said.

We left Lo Manthang and circled back down the Kali Gandaki, visiting a few other Gompas, notably the 7th-century Gar Gompa, which had also been restored by Luigi's team. We stumbled into another *Yartung* in Muktinath, where bareback riders galloped through town and the elders danced and sang. When we arrived back in Jomson, Keith immediately dove into an Internet shop to find out how the Yankees did while we were away. He chides me that a pitcher that my beleaguered Rockies traded to the Yanks has been doing well.

The abrupt rate of change we had witnessed - here in Jomsom, up in Lo Manthang, begged the question about Mustang's future. It was clear that soon, the road through Jomson would soon go all the way to Muktinath, bringing Indian Hindu pilgrims to the holy site for the weekend. The Chinese road from the north might never connect, but the forces of change were clearly accelerating towards an indeterminate destination. Fully a quarter of the Loba had already left Mustang;



hundreds had settled in New York, working illegally for Indian and Chinese bosses and commuting from Brooklyn and Queens to Manhattan.

In 1956, British Tibetologist David Snellgrove had been one of the early Westerners to visit Mustang (though he never reached Lo Manthang), and had emerged somewhat disillusioned by the culture already in transition. "I left this place feeling as though I had had a vision of the last days of Tibetan Buddhism - its images and text no longer understood or cared for," he wrote in *Himalayan Pilgrimage*.

It occurred to me that Sherab's Quixotic attempt to keep the old ways alive with his thanka delivery and support of the Tibetan medical school in Lo Manthang made for an interesting counterpoint to Snellgrove's observations. Despite Sherab's fears that Mustang might become "another wretched Nepali tourist village," with knick-knack shops and bad approximations of Mexican food, his gifts had provided at very least a gesture of renaissance that left him happy and spent. "I'll never do this again on foot," he said definitively, sipping from our second bottle of locally-brewed apple brandy at Om's Home and waiting for the flight home. "Maybe on a horse or mule."

We toasted our fellowship and our trek, satisfied at defying the gravitational pull of routine and pulling off this remarkable trip. Looking around the table, we all realized how much of a bond we had formed, how much more intimately we knew each other and the land we had just walked across.

The next morning, we boarded the Buddha Air flight that would start us on our way home. Mustang loomed behind us, an uncertain place sitting on top of a troubled country in what feels like an increasingly perilous age. As the plane banked steeply to follow the curves of the Kali Gandaki, Sherab sat in a window seat, his battered felt hat brim pressed against the window, a small grin revealing his carefully tended teeth.

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