

My Himalayan adventure

MY journey began with an early meet at Heathrow. I met the other 19 people from around Britain who were to be my companions for the next two weeks for the first time.

The group hit it off almost immediately and we were quickly embarking on the first part of our journey, which was a six hour flight to Kuwait airport.

After an epic five hour wait in Kuwait airport (not helped by Kuwait being an alcohol free state!) we were flying to Dehli on yet another six hour flight.

Arriving in Dehli was a massive culture shock. The humidity was overwhelming and this was at 4.30 in the morning!

However what was even more overwhelming was the vast amount of poverty in and around Dehli. On our short journey to the hotel we drove past several huge rubbish dumps and each one was swamped with hundreds of children scavenging for plastic and cardboard.

It just seemed that every possible space in Dehli was inhabited by thousands of people and every roundabout had become a teeming colony.

We spent a couple hours freshening up in the hotel and were quickly ushered out to visit some of the sites where Actionaid do magnificent work in supporting the street children in Dehli.

The first project we visited provided love, warmth and shelter for hundreds of Dehli street children during the day and evenings in a room no bigger than some of our front rooms!

The fifty or so children that were present when we visited had been practising a dance performance for weeks in honour of our visit. It seemed as if the children didn't have a care in the world seeing them dance and sing with such broad and happy smiles.

After speaking to the children after the performance it quickly came across that all of them were homeless orphans who worked in the rubbish dumps picking cardboard

and plastic to sell in order to feed themselves and any younger siblings. The kids just seemed to look after themselves in their own little community.

That evening after a quick meal we were off on an overnight train to Chakki Bank, near Dharamasala. Dharamasala is now the home to the Dalai Lama, and now plays residence to the biggest Tibetan community outside of Tibet.

Here we explored the Dalai Lama's home and spiritual garden, and several Buddhist monasteries and temples, these were all really incredible and a really spiritual experience.

The Buddhist monks and whole Tibetan community came across as the most peaceful and spiritual people in the world. Indeed every Buddhist monk we passed or spoke to had the most peaceful face and such a genuine smile.

The next day we were off to the Himalayan border to a place called Bir. We visited Sherab-Ling monastery, home to a three storey, gold plated, jewel encrusted Buddha.

Later we had a warm up trek in the foothills of the Himalayas, where we saw for the first time the magnitude of the mountains and the task that lay ahead over the next week.

The following day was our first day of the trek, we crossed an ancient trading route across Haribag Pass (2,500m). As we passed through several small villages, the school children and locals were out in force to greet us.

We were invited in to nearly every home, and handed walnuts and other treats as we passed. Everyone seemed so genuinely happy to see us.

The next day we crossed Sun Pass (2,700m) and went through La Paz village, again the locals were out to greet us in force.

We followed the Thadkot river through some spectacular scenery, passing hamlets and villages whose lifestyle has not changed for centuries. Indeed some of the younger children had never seen a westerner before and were really intrigued by the group.



We spent the night in tents, enjoying a camp fire (and a few kingfishers) and looking up at the huge array of stars.

Day three of the trek was probably the hardest. We trekked for eight hours through Alpine pastures with beautiful panoramic views of the snow capped Dhauladur range to the North, and the Shivalik mountains further South. We spent the night in an old colonial hunting lodge used many years ago by the British and the Maharajas.

The next day was an optional trek, which about half the group including myself decided to go on. We climbed to a nearby pass, again with absolutely spectacular panoramic views of the Himalayas, and reached the highest part of our whole trek at 3,500m.

Day five of our trek took in the magnificent Shilpadhani, a beautiful small village perched on a steep slope surrounded by alpine woodland.

We passed several legendary Himalayan shepherds, called the Gaddis, who led a nomadic life completely unchanged for centuries. We spent our lunch being overlooked by the magnificent Himalayan Griffin Vultures!

Once in camp some of us decided on a swim in a nearby river, after swim-

ming around for about ten minutes in the freezing water we looked up and noticed we were being watched by an entire village all laughing their heads off at us!

The final day of our trek took us to Ropa, this was a quite surreal day as we passed through hilly woodland that could easily have been parts of Exmoor!

We were picked up by jeeps and transferred to Baijnath temple, a spectacular Shiva temple built in 804AD. It is an ancient and important pilgrimage site for Hindu people all around the world.

We were later transferred to Taragarh Palace, our home for the night. The Palace has played home to the Maharajas for centuries, and is where Prince Charles stays on his visits to India, or so legend has it!

The Palace was amazing, a couple of us played Badminton, and I later retreated to my room to watch Liverpool vs Chelsea in the Champions League (well I couldn't miss that!).

After a very comfortable night in the Palace we visited the Norbulinka Institute. The Institute was established to teach and preserve Tibetan art and crafts including wood carving, statue making, thangka painting and embroidery. It was a beautiful and peaceful

place. her help and guidance throughout), my mum and sisters (again for all their help throughout), Mark Wood, Ivor Whittle, all the footballers and cricketers on the White Hart vs Bear charity matches (unlucky with the cricket White Hart!), all the high ropers (who braved the weather

conditions), all those who attended quizzes, Jayne (for her phone donation) and all three pubs (for allowing me to keep collecting tins by the bar).

Thanks also to my miscellaneous donors, together we managed to raise £2,850 for Actionaid! Thank You!

Kevin Irvine

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Exmoor voices (and faces too)

WIVELISCOMBE Historical Society's 2005-06 programme of talks got off to a good start when Birdie Johnson brought some of the oral history recordings she had collected for the Exmoor Archive.

Over the best part of two years she recorded 78 people in over 200 hours of recordings. That is a vast resource of which we could obviously hear only a small selection.

Our enjoyment of the recordings was greatly enhanced by Mark Rattenbury's photographs of the speakers being shown on the screen as each one was speaking.

Some of these photographs showed the speakers in the settings where they had lived much of their lives, such as on the farm, in the kitchen, in church, or out on the moor.

Not all the speakers were native to Exmoor, but they appeared to have come to terms with what had for many been a hard life, especially in their younger days.

First we heard Walter Barwick talking about the village school he attended, where two of the teachers were brother and sister, the brother being the Head.

He, however, could not bring himself to cane a child. When the need arose, the erring pupil would be sent to the sister, carrying a card asking to be caned. She would prolong the agony for the wretched child by not breaking off from

her work until it suited her, when she would administer the punishment.

Hope Bourne is the only one of the speakers whose name is known outside the local area, because she has written books about her life on Exmoor. She intrigued us with the description of her minimal style of housekeeping, which enabled her to spend most of her day outdoors, where she preferred to be.

Bill Partridge had a hard childhood, his mother dying when he was nine. When he grew up, the war came along and he joined the army. He survived the active service, though feeling that he did not deserve to, as many of his friends had not.

After the war he came back to help his father on the family farm, and stayed for the rest of his life.

Hilda Parham described the nursing help she received when giving birth sixty or more years ago. Dr. Ernest Mold came to Lynton as GP in the 1950s. He was much concerned at the lack of provision for mental health care then.

A patient that was too ill to be treated at home had to be sent to the county hospital, which was over sixty miles away near Exeter.

Ada Richards talked about the sheep shearing. A number of farmers would get together to help shear each others' sheep, and they would go around to each farm in turn.

It was Ada's job to keep the men supplied

with beer. She would be careful to serve only mild beer in the morning, and something a little stronger in the afternoon.

The strongest beer was kept back for the evening session, the sing-song, which could go on until one o'clock in the morning.

Joan Smith spent part of her childhood in a house on the Exmoor coast, where she had a five mile walk to school, some of it through heather taller than herself. She went on to grammar school and a career in teaching. Her last position was deputy head at Wiveliscombe.

Olive Vigars said life was hard when she was young, but that was life in those days. "I'm glad I did what I did."

In giving the vote of thanks, Mark Gibbs remarked that people talk about "grumpy old men" but those we had listened to that evening had been far from grumpy.

Miss Johnson said that she could not recall a "grumpy old man" among her recordings but she did have one "grumpy old woman" who found fault with everybody and everything. Everyone else seemed contented with life.

* On 9th January we hope to have Peter Langdon talking about his grandmother, Mrs Bessie Langdon, who made the small beginnings in Wiveliscombe in the 19th century of a business that has continued into the 21st century.

JRB