

Hello from Goa! .....	2
Hello from Jaisalmer, Rajasthan .....	5
We are in Sikkim.....	7
Subject: India here we come!.....	8
Subject: Katmandu!.....	10
Subject: On the Road Again .....	12
Subject: Seasons Greetings from the Malabar Coast .....	14
Subject: South India - Part I.....	15
Subject: South India - Part 2.....	17
Subject: The Amazing Annapurnas! .....	21
Subject: Trekking!.....	24

## Hello from Goa!

We are back at the beach (seems like there is some kind of gravitational pull!) but we've moved north a couple hundred kilometres. When last we wrote

we were at the southern tip of India and we've travelled via boat, bus, train, and even an old narrow-gauge, cog driven steam engine and have finally stopped to rest at another beautiful beach on the coast of the Arabian

Sea. In between there and here, we've been busy seeing the local sights; Kerala's lush green rural landscape, palaces of the Maharajas, ancient Hindu

temples, imposing Mughal forts, Hindu, Buddhist and Jain monastic caves and museums stocked with beautiful Asian arts. It's been a whirlwind trip through time as most of the sites we visited were not of this or even the last century!

Some of the highlights included:

- Tipu Sultan's (one of the last rulers to hold out against the British) summer palace which is an 18th century open, breezy Mughal style building with the walls, ceilings and columns all painted with beautiful floral motifs, princely court scenes and episodes from historic battles showing the

full regalia of power including elephants supporting the Sultan's golden howdah's (elephant saddle). As we sat in the surrounding gardens under a huge mango tree, enjoying the shade, sipping on our bottled water and admiring the stately view we got a taste of the luxuriant life the rulers of India once led.

- The town of Hampi with its "flintstone-like" topography, Vijayanagar palace ruins strewn about for us to explore, 9th - 15th century Hindu temples and daily influx of pilgrims making their way to the various temples

to perform their puja (devotional act). We spent a week there exploring the ruins and finding shade when we could and enjoying the brilliant sunsets over the rocky landscape dotted with patches of green (made possible by the 500 year old irrigation system - the only "working" remains at the site). The town hasn't changed much - it's on a river and the small village on the other side is accessed by means that haven't changed in half a century! Everyone still contracts the local ferry men to paddle them across in small circular boats (like large wicker baskets). We read a reference from a 15th century Portuguese traveller that mentions the very same ferrymen, boats and pilgrims!

- The monastic caves of Ajanta and Ellora (in Maharashtra State) live up to their reputation! They are classified as World Heritage Sites and all 60 (approx.) caves are carved out of bedrock - excavated rather than constructed! They aren't just little caves scrapped out for shelter - they are full blown temples with rooms, doorways, large halls with massive columns, and some with 30 ft. high vaulted ceilings. Most were decorated as well - with beautiful carvings on the pillars and statues of Buddha (in the Buddhist caves) or Mahesh (in the Jain caves) or Shiva the Destroyer (in the Hindu caves). At Ajanta there were a few caves that still had some of the wall and ceiling paintings intact! Pictures painted in the 2nd. century B.C.

of people and animals and the life of Buddha animated the chambers with 2000

years old humanistic faces looking back at us! Some of the Hindu caves at Ellora were built like something out of "Raiders of the Lost Ark" with massive stone pillars, 20 ft. tall statues of Shiva the Destroyer (six arms, swords, a necklace of human skulls, etc...), tunnels that let in light and back stairways that lead to other caves (we felt like we were in a "Tomb Raiders" videogame!).

- Of the forts we visited, the 13th century Deogiri fort near Aurangabad was

really cool. Originally a Buddhist monastery, it was turned into a fort by Hindu and Muslim rulers. It remains a maze of gateways, passages, moats, bridges, tunnel passages all shielding the citadel at the very top (long climb up!) which has a magnificent (and commanding) view of the entire region. The inner defensive ring was carved out of the rock outcrop and they

actually shaved the sides of the hill to make scaling the walls impossible. The ingenious defense system made unwelcomed access to the citadel a deadly prospect! (tunnels that divide and meet again to fool attackers into fighting each other in the dark, long tortuous passageways that were sealed tight and filled with noxious gases and shutes leading to the moat below for

ejecting the bodies, dead or not so dead!). We had fun creeping through the tunnels with the high pitched squeak of bats in the darkness above us and a very weak flashlight to guide us through! When we finally made it to the very top (with only school groups to obstruct our ascent), we sat next to an

old cannon with a Persian inscription on the muzzle that read "Creator of Storms" and looked out onto the flat and arid landscape around us, watched a

few squirrels skitter-skatter about and imagined the fort and town in its glory days. We could see why the Muslim rulers were able to maintain power over the area for nearly 700 years!

We can't believe that some of the key sights that we wanted to visit in India are behind us now - all proving to be as spectacular as we had envisioned. It's already the end of February! Strange how time seems to be speeding up in a land where things don't seem to change.

Send us your news! Love to hear how everyone has been - it's our tether to normalacy and the 21st century!

Kerri & Eric.

## Hello from Jaisalmer, Rajasthan

- on the edge of the Thar Desert, the border with Pakistan, possibly the edge of the world...?

We've really stepped back in time with this leg of the trip. We are staying in yet another walled city, a medieval Mogul/Rajput hilltop fortress with narrow winding streets, arched gates, palaces and elaborately carved merchant homes, "havelis", with inner courtyards, balconies overhanging the walkways and delicately carved sandstone "jali" screens in the windows that allows the desert breeze in but keeps the heat of the sun out and permitted the rajput wives and concubines to see the activities in the streets without themselves being visible. It's a small town (very small by Indian standards) and easy for us to walk around. By chance we ended up here prior to a major (centuries old) 3 day festival called "holi" in which everyone runs around pasting each other with bright, colourful powder and spraying each other with tinted water. We tried to hide - they tell us the colour comes out of your cloths but that remains to be seen yet. For days after Holi we could see the

Following that we spent a four days out in the desert travelling by camel. Camels are really funny looking animals, nothing really to compare them to - quite unique with large flat bottomed feet for negotiating the soft sand, long legs that keep the body away from the midday heat of the rocks and sand below, legs that neatly fold (in a very mechanical looking fashion) under the body to preserve heat during the cold desert nights, two sets of eye lids and long eye lashes to keep the dust of desert storms out (we got a little taste of one and they would have come in handy), and rude body sounds that reveal their unsocial, solitary life. Our camels, "Johnny" and "Babalu", were semi-intelligent - Johnny willing to obey the reins but reluctant to move beyond a slow gate, while Babalu would only follow but was easily persuaded to run.

Our safari days started with chai, toast and eggs prior to breaking camp. On camelback, our caravan of four (the two of us, Gillian a fellow traveller, and two camel drivers sharing one camel) walked and trotted through the open, endless, desert which was void of most life except a few roaming goats, some wild deer, and a few small villages where the locals were clad in brightly coloured dresses, veils and turbans. To avoid the mid-day heat and scorching sun, we'd hide under the shade of a lone tree, and Mehendra and Nahru (the camel drivers cum cooks), would unpack the camels and feed us (chai, fresh chapatis, and vegetable curry - the camels got mulched grass). We'd have lazy conversation (Gillian is the daughter of the bass player for Deep Purple - who are still touring! - and she is starting a musical career herself as a singer - we got a sampling one evening - she has a beautiful voice) and then we'd all nap with the hot breeze b

We'd break camp around 4pm and ride for a few more hours. These late afternoon rides were our favorite part of the safari. The setting sun gave everything a golden hue and the long shadows of our little caravan stretched towards the endless horizon. The rhythmic sway of the camels lulled us into an almost meditative state and the peace and quite (a rarity in India) of the desert was serene. Perched high on our camels, one afternoon we saw beautiful peacocks strutting amongst the low bushes and sand. We'd make camp just as the sun was setting - unpack the camels, gather dried brush for the evening fire, prepare the evening meal (chai, chapatis, dal and rice - we ate a lot of chapatis!) and enjoy some joking and teasing (Mehendra is getting married off in two months - he's 25 - and we were teasing him about his fantasy of being rescued by a Japanese girl and moving to Tokyo - he was scared The safari was great and we figure a month long journey next time is in order!

Take Care all and do send us your news!!!! (or else!)

Kerri & Eric.

P.S. Relunctately we're leaving the desert, the camels and the fort-cities to move onto the hussle and bussle of Delhi and Varanasi - wish us luck!

Thu Mar 29 08:12:21 2001

Subject: Hi

Hi Kris, Todd, Linda, Dad/John!

## **We are in Sikkim**

- back up in the Himalayas - loving it here. It's pouring rain at the moment but it's the first rain we've seen in 6 months so we are quite excited! Sikkim reminds us of B.C - lots of trees, hills, ferns, and moss - we visited a orchid garden this afternoon and it was just breathtaking. Kris, is B.C climate good for orchids? - it just seems so similiar here.

We are expected back into Canada mid-June - depends on our money situation, weather in Malaysia (we're trying to out run the monsoon) and frame of mind. Yes, we are definitely having "timmy" withdrawals (Dutchies, apple fritters, and honey glazed please) and Wendy's cravings too! Oh, how we could go for a Classic Burger - Double for Eric and oh, those frosties! We are hungry right now too so that doesn't help!

We'll we better be off to find some dinner!

We're here in Gangtok, Sikkim for another day then we are off on a 9 day trek! Will tell you more about that tomorrow when we can supply a website with photos!

Hope everyone is well and happy!

Love Kerri & Eric.

## **Subject: India here we come!**

Hi Everyone!

We've been getting to know Kathmandu and the area really well this last week while we've been arranging our Indian Visas. At last after countless hours in line, a few helpful tips from others further ahead in the visa process and some lucky timing on our part we have our tourist visa for India - good for 6 months thankfully! With all the trips to the embassy, we've been become experts at maneuvering through the busy streets. Walking with a steady pace we can gracefully (?) dodge the oncoming motorbike, quickly sidestep the rickshaw behind us with it's bell ringing madly, ignore the vendor on the sideline seeking both our attention and money, while competing

for walking space with all the other pedestrians and the occasional cow! All

that, and we can even keep the crap (we hope from the cow) off our shoes! We're also tougher when it comes to all the guides, taxi drivers, rickshaw boys, and vendors selling everything from tigerbalm, flutes, chess games, jewelry, to hash and dope etc. We've come a long way from when we first arrived and politely said "no thank you, no thank you, no thank you etc..." to everyone who approached us or demanded our attention. We can now walk through a market or touristy section of town with our heads high and our path uninterrupted. We just might be ready for India now!

So, 6 months in India - here we come. Our travel plans for India have already changed several times but this is where our plans stand now. A long (16hrs), overnight bus ride to the border then ... well the travel details get hazy but basically onto the eastern hill states of Assam and Megalaya (we decided to keep Sikkim and the hills around Darjeeling for the spring when the trekking conditions are improved - ie. not so cold!). Then into Calcutta for a few days (wish us luck) before our long journey (56hr train ride) south to Kerala (with one stop over in Orissa to see some pretty cool looking temple complexes). Once there, we'll be rewarded with touring along the amazing Malabar coast and Kerala back waters. We may even treat ourselves to a short, luxurious, sun-filled, island excursion to the magnificent Maldives in the middle of the Indian Ocean. (We're checking out pricing via the Internet - loving this WWW. stuff - if you want to droll over island retreat pictures, check out [www.visitmaldives.com](http://www.visitmaldives.com)). This internary should take us about 2- 3 months (hopefully Christmas on the islands) We won't entice you with more travel plans they'll probably change anyways. If however, anyone wants to join us on any leg of our trip - just let us know!!



We expect we'll find access to our e-mail account once we are in Calcutta (in about 3 weeks from now.) Keep us posted - we'll be looking forward to reading your news and thoughts (and any travel plans you may have for this part of the world! - we've done our best to entice you! Don't wait for the winter blahs to hit - plan now!)  
Hope you are healthy and happy!

## **Subject: Katmandu!**

Hi Everyone!

We made it! We've been in Katmandu for 3 days now and are loving it! The flight was not so bad - the inflight service was amazing - complete with

hot towellettes, individual tv's with remote control and a few channels for video games too! They even had a channel showing the minute by minute flight

path of the plane - very cool. We saw the Queen Charlotte islands and the coast of Japan before stopping in Soeul, Korea to change our flight crew. We

had an overnight stop in Singapore - very impressed with the airport. Then on to Katmandu the next day - we saw some amazing looking islands off of Thailand on route! Arriving in Katmandu was all very easy - changing money, clearing customs, taxi ride into town, finding a great little hotel with a roof top patio and view of the valley! We were amazed at how stressless it was! Since then we have been checking out the sites - yesterday we wandered the streets, maneuvering through rickshaw drivers, people, motorbikes, bikes,

buses, taxis, and even an occasional cow - the holy type! We got up early (the jet lag helped) and walked to Durbar Square where there are a cluster of hindu temples - very old with three tier pagoda style architecture. All are still used and we watched the local people go through the rituals of offerings rice, flower petals, incense, etc. to the carved deities. Many of the rituals were been done by the people before heading off to work. It was a great place to people watch - the people performing their rituals, the other tourists, the locals trying to sell tiger balm, beads, chess boards, and tours of the square. The Sandus - the rastafarian holy men of the east were really interesting too.

Today we visited a totally different site - the tibetan Buddhist site called Bouddhanath Stupa - much more sedate and peaceful with the prayer flags flowing and the Buddhist monks wondering around and pilgrims walking around the Stupa spinning the prayer wheels.

We ended our visit with a beer on a rooftop restaurant overlooking the large Stupa (38 meters high) with it's large eyes looking back (The eyes signify awareness in the Tibetan Buddhist religion).

Now we are off to dinner - so far all the restaurants we have tried have been great and cheap! On average a good meal costs about \$2 each.

We are loving the spicy food and the beer isn't bad either. The weather has been great too - warm (22 degrees) and a bit of cloud cover. The people are very friendly too. What more could we ask! Like we said - we're loving it here- it's easy to be the idle rich in Katmandu!

We'll be spending the next week here probably. Internet access is very easy and very accessible - so drop us a line and let us know how things are on the other side of the world!

## Subject: On the Road Again

Hi Everyone!

We'll we're finally ready to move on and will be leaving this lovely place in a few days. Kovalam Beach has been a wonderful spot for us to re-group (laundry, journal writing, books finished and replenished, western food at our fingertips, reconnection via e-mail with everyone, tans built and maintained, etc.). But time to move on and see the rest of South India! Our plan is to head up along the backwaters (slow boat north) then move inland towards the Western Ghats (hills) where it will be a bit cooler (it's been so hot here that we've lost our appetite!) to explore tea plantations, view wild elephants and marvel at the architectural heritage of the region (palaces & temples).

Kovalam Beach... Wow - we would definitely recommend it as a vacation place.

It's a golden, crescent shaped beach buffeted at both ends by coconut palm covered bluffs. At one head there is a tall, red and white banded lighthouse

that sends out it's prism enhanced beacon at night. Open air, sand-floored, thatched restaurants line the beach and offer fresh seafood every evening. The beach buzzes with the activities of boogy-boarders, European sunbathers,

Indian tourists (dressed for a day at the office) strolling the beach, and the constant flow of the - fruit - ladies calling out "payapa, mango, pineapple, banana - fruit salad"? (freshly cut for 50 cents!). There are many places where you can take yoga or mediation classes and get ayurvedi messages for only \$5/hr. Your eyes meet the sunlight shimmering off the aquamarine waters of the Arabian Sea (dotted with the heads of swimmers) as white-capped waves brake and crash on the beach. Hot sunny days end with hazy red sunsets over the water and evening walks on the beach with the palm

trees silouetted against the moon light. But... this sounds like a travel brochure or a romance novel! You get the picture right? It's been a wonderful place to re-group.

Some of you may be aware that we treated ourselves to a trip to the Maldiv Islands (Arabian Sea) over the holidays. All we can really say that does it any justice is that the place felt like "paradise"! (just like "Survivor" only with room service.) We snorkled every day (sometimes twice) and wow... more reef fish than we could keep track of and hues that would put a

Colourist to shame! Just Brilliant! After a week in paradise we were ready to face India again.

You can tell we've had a tough break from our travels but we've managed to get by. Would you believe that despite the low cost of the Aryurvedic messages we haven't actually had or needed one?

Talk to you again... Looking forward to more news from everyone.

## **Subject: Seasons Greetings from the Malabar Coast**

\*\*\*\*\*SEASONS GREETINGS\*\*\*\*\*

~~~~~We hope everyone has a wonderful holiday and your Christmas and New Years celebrations are full of cheer.~~~~~

As for us we are back on the beach after a week long tour of the temples of South India. We have landed on the Malabar Coast (in Kerala state) at Kovalam Beach. It's a wonderful spot with coconut palms, impressive waves for body surfing (Eric already has some bruises received from one wave that took him face first into the sand!), and rocky outcrops flanking the golden beach. There are lots of seaside restaurants to choose from and we are hoping to find one that can simulate a Canadian Christmas dinner for us. We'll be thinking of you all as you gather with friends and/or family and feast on ham/turkey dinner and get tipsy on egg nog!

## **Subject: South India - Part I**

Hi Everyone,

WARNING: this one is long and has a definite socio-historical bent - it may not be for everyone and we won't be offended if you gloss over it. We'll spice up the next one (Part 2 - "The spiritual south") for those seeking vicarious reading.

We're back in Kerala (after a short off-shore excursion in paradise - more on that later) enjoying the sun, sand and thrilling surf of Kovalam Beach. We've settled in here a bit and had plenty of time to regroup and contemplate our travels to date (which unfortunately we are going to share with you - our kind subscribers).

We think we are finally starting to adjust to the demands of travel in India

(someone told us once that you need to cross a 6 week thresh-hold before you

can appreciate what India has to offer - it seems they may be right)! We are both more relaxed dealing with the troublesome side of travel here and we have learned the skills required to be both polite and friendly while still maintaining a level of distance and distrust (so we don't get really disappointed and angry when we get gouged, cheated, etc). O.K. - we aren't there yet but all in all I think we are becoming a bit more "easternized?", for better or worse as it may be.

Of far greater impact we have also found out that the south (peninsular India) inflicts a much gentler spin on our western sensibilities (less filth,

less begging, vendors who don't seem as desperate). The people here seem to have more confidence and exhibit more pride in what they do and how they manage what they have. After we left Puri - on the north-east coast - we took a train south to Chennai (formerly Madras - the original British East India Co. strong hold in Asia) and noticed the changes as soon as we arrived. The atmosphere in the railway station (a large open-air "Victorian/Indo-Saracenic" building - that's the long way to say "Raj era" architecture) was quite different. The residents from the track-side slums were absent, the platforms were clean and the queues moved with organized efficiency.

Later, when visiting a large state run museum the exhibits displayed

didactic panels (in English, Hindi and Tamil) that were actually informative. The text helped us make sense of the extensive and complex history of Tamil Nadu (and the adjoining states of peninsular India). Another exhibition highlighting stone temple sculpture (usually variations on the primary Hindu deities Vishnu and Shiva) displayed the sequential development (very impressive) of the work over the last 1800 years. Tamil language (the oldest living language in India and one of the oldest in human

history - with an exquisit and sexy form of script) had an exhibit designed around it's evolution. These examples may seem minor from a western perspective but from our experiences to date in India they display an exceptional change in attitude. The museum is run down and funding is clearly an issue but the institution conveyed a sense of pride regarding the

destinguished (and lengthy) history of southern India.

Our suspicion is that the history of this part of the sub-continent has contibuted to the development of the different attitudes we see. THE HISTORY LESSON BEGINS...

The Hindu Dynasties (8th -17th centuries) that ruled Pensinsular India repeatedly repelled the attempted invations of the Muslim invaders from Afaghanstan, Persia, and the Mongolian Steppes. The northern Moguls never succeeded in penetrating the south during their conquest of "Hindustan". As a result Hindu culture flourished here uninterrupted for over 4500 years (having escaped the destruction caused by the Muslim conquerers of the north, south India is famous for it's ancient Hundu temple complexes). When the British arrived their expansion across the south came late and was short

lived. We're sure any post-colonial theorist would suggest that the religious/cultural thread linking the region through the ages has nurtured a

strong sense of identity and pride in the people of peninsular India (vs. the "status-quo" attitude that exhausts us in the - repeatedly conquered - north).

On the economic front, south India has orchistrated it's affairs and been able to look beyond it's immediate needs for centuries (including foreign trade with South-east Asia, Africa, the Middle-East, and the Mediterainian -

Greek writers make reference to ports in south India and Roman coins are commonly found here during archeological digs). An extensive system of canals along the coast of Kerala (the Backwaters which we will be exploring when/if we leave here) was built to move goods (rice, cloves, cardomon etc...) to the port towns. The south also has a long tradition of exporting it's ancient knowledge (ie. Aruvedic medicine, yoga, meditation and other trappings of Hindu spiritualism). International trade still comprises a



substantial part of the local economy (now including tea and coffee) and Bangalore (the capital of Karnataka state to the north of us) is the center of the high tech industry.

With trade comes foreign ideas. One interesting legend (Kerala has a large christian community) suggests St. Thomas, one of the original deciples of Christ, made his way here via the existing trade routes through the Middle-east, settled in Kerala and converted the local community to Christianity prior to his death (The area also has Mosques, Synagogues, Armenian church's etc). Through trade the peninsula is less insular and the people here are able to link imported ideas to Hindu cultural standards with

a confidence gained through traditions that are millenia old.

If you are interested in business ventures in Asia please note that from our

(western) perspective this part of India is better placed to survive in the global environment (and with a middle-class of over 300 million people India

is actively pursuing the emmenities of a global environment). If you are interested in travel in Asia south India might be a great place to start.

THE CONCLUSION...

The disparities (and aggravations) evident in the north seem less extreme on

the peninsula. In short we are much happier here and the weather is better too!

We hope this didn't bore you too much, but from here it's all very interesting. Please send us your comments and questions.

## **Subject: South India - Part 2**

Hello Everyone!

We hope everyone is having a successful start to the new (real) Millenium!  
We've heard you've been getting a lot of snow (for those in Ontario) and are

you weathering it okay? Anyone heading south in search of an escape? Kovalam

Beach, here in India, seems to be a popular winter retreat for Europeans (cheap charter flights). If anyone has any aspirations, we'd love to play travel agent! Send us your news and let us know how your holidays went.

We promised part 2 would be a bit more stimulating. Today's offering is a snapshot from our "temple tour" in Tamil Nadu. We visited several cities and

their temple complexes (eventually got "temped-out") and they were amazing so we wanted to share it with you.

The day is set in Madurai - home of a famous temple complex and pilgrimage site.

It all started with our tasty morning pick-me-up - "chai" (tea leaves, nutmeg, cardamom, cloves and sugar boiled together, that they blend with frothy hot milk in a performance that would make a Vegas bartender jealous).

As we sipped, we watched a man do his morning "puja" at a small Ganesh shrine (who has an elephant head and rotund body and is popular because he is known as "the remover of obstacles"). The devotee performed a sequence of

actions including, ceremonial cleansing, offerings of food and flower petals, symbolic hand to head gesturing and prostration before the image. The public nature of worship here continues to fascinate us. By 8 am we were off to a good start having experienced two of India's cultural pillars - "chai" and "puja".

Up the street there was a big crowd forming and some sort of procession approaching. We went to investigate and found the local devotees parading bronze statues of the god Shiva and his consort, the goddess Minakshi, through town. Each image, draped in silk robes and garlands of yellow marigolds, was seated on a huge silver bull. Each bull was cradled atop a wooden chariot propelled through the streets by priests and hundreds of devotees. Hindus believe that viewing the images of the gods at auspicious times enables direct contact with the gods. Viewing the images of the god and goddess was a significant event for the people and it was pretty interesting for us too. We tried to get a picture but got squeezed out by the press of the crowd as they positioned themselves for a good look as the deities passed by. The procession continued on but in its wake rice thrown by the priests (sacred stuff!) was quickly collected from the street. We could see the joy on the faces of the people that got a few kernels and the look of envy from those that didn't! We continued on to the temple complex and were caught amongst hundreds of others heading the same way. Amongst the

crowd were many women with fragrant white flowers in their hair, others with yellow dye smeared on their faces (they looked jaundiced) and men with wide stripes of ash smeared across their foreheads (a common sight in the south).

Large groups of men clothed only in black (belonging to one sect or another)

were walking with determination and quickly cut a path for themselves through the masses (they gave us the impression of a - holy - street gang!).

Everyone it seemed was en-route to perform their morning ablations.

The Minakshi temple complex (unique because it is dedicated to the consort of Shiva; Minakshi the fish-eyed goddess) was started in the 16th century. Built of stone and expanded by various rulers over the centuries the labyrinth of towering gates, collanaded walkways, pillared halls, water tanks

and shrines dedicated to various deities was swarming with devotees. The outer wall had four entrances (south, north, east and west) each topped with

large, towering "gopuram" which rose about 8-10 stories high and covered with thousands of brightly painted sculptures of gods, goddesses and animals. The second inner wall also had large "gopurams". Nine in total, the

towers stand out across the cityscape and can be seen for miles (they reminded us of the Mayan temples at Tikal and invoked the same sense of awe). Within the walls, there were 17th century murals (scenes of the daily activities of the kings, including impalement - very large spikes - of un-loyal subjects!) and Tamil inscriptions (in marble) of the 1330 couplets of the Book of Ethics. In the "thousand pillared hall" (which also housed a collection of bronze figurines) there were stone carvings in the form of "yali" (mystical gryphon-like beasts), Parvati (Shiva's volumptious consort playing the "vina" a stringed instrument), Hunamen (the monkey faced god), etc... In the heart of the complex the five golden domed "vimanas" (sanctuaries - entrance for Hindus only) housed the main deities and others which were the daily draw for the thousands of pilgrims.

We were overwhelmed with it all and were so excited we didn't know which way

to look first. Throughout the complex there was a buzz of activity created by the worshippers performing "puja" at the various shrines and sanctuaries.

A moody mix of flashing neon light, smoke from burning oil wicks and incense

all highlighted by beams of sunlight from the entranceway filled the stone hall preceding the sanctuary to Shiva. Worshippers threw offerings of rice and Ghee (butter) on stone images. Others, plams together and muttering prayers, prostrated themselves before huge stone sculptures of the deities in their various forms. Out of the chaos a seeming order or ordering emerged

as we witnessed repeated patterns of "puja" and the circulation of devotees

from shrine to shrine throughout the complex. The worshippers went about their activities with concentrated determination and devotion evident in their faces. The activity was all around us and our eyes were wide with interest as we tried to absorb all these new sights. Set in the ancient complex amongst the grand sculptures, we could easily visualize the same flood of devotion happening hundreds of years ago. The thread through time was evident. Cool eh!

After hours of wandering around the complex, we came upon a huge gathering in one of the pillared halls. The procession of Shiva and Minakshi had returned to the temple and hundreds of devotees were crammed before them in a large open hall. We were watching from the sidelines and could see in the faces around us the reverence the people felt for the idols. As chanting priests lit candles and lifted them before the god and goddess (still perched on the silver bulls and garlanded with yellow marigolds) a reverent "ahhh" escaped from the crowd as drums beat in the background. Curiously, some devotees tapped their cheeks in a sequence of hand movements. The intensity of the devotees during the ceremony was strong and quite palpable

and we were impressed by the unification of the crowd. We could easily image the potential of this power if harnessed.

After collecting our shoes at gate (everyone goes barefoot in temples as an act of reverence) we headed for the hotel. We came away with our heads packed full of new images and the exhilaration of having been witness to a deeper aspect of Hindu life. The temple and it's activities offered us an experience where the past and the living present overlapped. (Perhaps overlapping 'time lines' aren't limited to the domains of science-fiction and metaphysics!). What a day!

## **Subject: The Amazing Annapurnas!**

Hello Canadians!

The longer we are away, the more patriotic we feel. We got into a heated debate the other day (while in line for our Indian Tourist Visa's) about the differences between Canadians and Americans - Of course it was the American who proposed that Canadians and Americans are indential. We put up a great arguement and won the support from all the other colonials in line! Every time we tell the Nepali where we are from they respond - "Canada - good country". Maybe they say that for all countries but I think we Canadians have a good rep abroad. Yeh Canada!

So, where do we begin. The last time we e-mailed we were full of enthusiasm for the prospect of trekking amongst the highest mountains in the world. Well, that enthusiasm still holds true but now with a greater sense of awe and understanding. It really felt more like and advenure than a "trip" - it

was like walking (literally) into a culture and environment that at times felt Tolkein-like (ie. Lord of the Rings).

We were on the trail for 32 days with only four rest days. Most of the time

we started our day around 7-8 am. (We were usually the last ones out of the lodge) and walked for 5-7 hours. Needless to say we are in much better shape

than when we started! They should market the circuit as the next hip fitness

regime. The topograghy we walked through changed each day - the great thing about the Annapurna Circut is it's hard to get bored because each day presented a new environment and challenge. We started in bright green rice fields and watched the terracing get steeper and higher. For the first part of the trip, the trail followed the Marsyangdi Khola (river) which started as wide, full, milky green river - something that would make for a great rafting trip. As we walked up the valley and further into the mountains our

constant companion turned to a raging, loud river that was busy carving out the rock walls and turning massive boulders into tiny round river rocks! It

was a great example of mechanical erosion at work - all those geology courses paid off. Along with that, the valley walls got steeper and we found ourselves walking along the wall of a gorge with the river several

hundred meters below us (at least that's what it felt like when the trail was 3' wide and blasted out of the side of the vertical cliff face). We crossed the river from wall to wall on several of the fabled suspension bridges. Not such an easy task when you're carrying your 35-40 lb. backpack, trying to hold your hat on in the brisk wind, taking a picture of the 400 m waterfall cascading down the rock face (with the 30" wide bridge swaying in the breeze) and have to let a mule train go by. (Kerri thinks I'm

being a little overdramatic with that last scene but I want to build a little excitement - she may be right). Anyway the bridges were really exciting! Crossing the numerous landslides were a lot of fun too! The first few days there were about 3-4 landslide crossings a day which meant walking on a loose gravelly slope only a body width (barely at times) across with the constant reminder that if you slip the next stop is the raging river far

below!! My (Kerri) heart would pound so hard and on some sections Eric would

hold my hand as we crossed. It was a real struggle between mind control and pure fear! (In psychology's past they called this type of thing "flooding" therapy - where they scare the s\*\*\* out of you to rid you of your phobia! Not too ethical these days! - And I'm still not too thrilled about heights so

it may not work anyway!) The trail was really challenging for both of us to say the least.

Then we walked into pine forest with the Annapurna peaks coming into view and Tibetan-Buddist culture becoming more apparent. In every village there were prayer flags flowing above the homes and on the peaks of the surrounding hills. There were Mani walls with the rows of prayer wheels (when you walk past you spin the wheels releasing (spiritually) the prayer) and stones carved with the "om" mantra piled around and on top of the

mani-walls. We even saw a few water-powered prayer wheels (situated above a river with the flow of the river spinning the wheel and perpetually releasing the prayer). One of our favorite areas was the Manang valley which

was very dry, windy and cold. (Thanks for the wind breaker Mom: Eric) The wide valley seemed pre-historic somehow most especially when the Yaks/Naks (male/female) mooed - a very deep eerie sound echoing through the valley (We

think the producers of Jurassic Park used this sound for the Brachasaurus!).

The valley was now well above 3000 meters (Yaks can only survive in this altitude and higher). There were clusters of flat roofed stone homes, yaks and sturdy horses grazing in the valley and several Buddhist gompas

(monestaries) perched above the valley on the surrounding hills. A highlight from that area was our visit to one of the gompa's (over 500 years

old) where we got a private tour from a monk. During our visit there was some sort of vigil in process and the gompa was full of the local villagers sitting and spinning individual prayer wheels, releasing mantras for universal compassion and long life. We even received a blessing from the resident lama! A very spiritual experience! From the Manang Valley the peaks

and north face of the Annapurna Massiff are very clear and very close! We spent hours in awe of their incredible splendor - I think we used an entire 36 exp. role of film in one day just of the various views of the mountains and the valley.

From there we took it slow and acclimatized a bit every day and made it over

the 5426 meter "Thorung La" pass with spectacular views of the snowed covered mountains. We were high enough to be looking on the tops of the surrounding mountains instead of looking up to them! We can't wait for the pictures! After the pass - the Muktinath valley - also dry and arid but warmer followed. Another area that had an ancient, medieval feel about it, we were treated to one spectacular experience or view after another. Around

day 15 now, we started heading south on the second leg of the trip. We wandered through a wide river valley (the deepest gorge in the world they say), and into lush bamboo and rhododendron forests. We even treated our weary feet and bodies to a day at the hot springs.

We could go on but if we tell you everything you won't need to see the pictures! We had a great experience and we were away long enough that when we "re-entered" the motorized world the sound of a bus engine seemed vaguely

foreign - that felt great!

We are now in Kathmandu staying in the area that was frequented by the hippies in the 60's - it's called Freak Street! We'll be roaming around the Kathmandu valley visited some more sights for the next few days and then we are off to India! Please send us your news - we really enjoy hearing from home! We are not sure how accessible the internet will be in India (outside of the main cities anyway).

Love Kerri & Eric

P.S The co-writing of these e-mail messages has been a test of our relationship - but we've come to a consensus! (ie. we've kissed and made up!)

## **Subject: Trekking!**

Hi All, The Adventure begins! We leave tomorrow for a 6 hour bus ride to the trail head of the Annapurna Circuit. From then on it's up to our feet and our will power to get us through the next 140 miles! We'll be taking it easy

though - the guide books suggest 21 days to do the circuite but I think we'll want to stay a while a enjoy the views. The trail is an old trading route through the Himalayas and has been a well worn tourist trekking route for many years!!! So lots of tea houses and lodges to rest our weary feet! The monsoon season seems to be over and we had our first clear view of the Annapurna range - just amazing is all we can say! Truley awesome! Can't wait

to be walking in their shadows for the next few weeks with views every day! The trail also lead to us to many ancient Buddist temples and chortens and of course will give us a glimpse into the rural Nepali life. We'll be walking through about 6-8 different tribal communities.

We think we will be out of internet contact - but we'll look forward to your news when we get back to Pokhara!