

## The Sabbatical Journey - Part 3: Nepal

*Jo Loveridge*

We touched down in Kathmandu and immediately began to feel better, the altitude sickness disappearing as quickly as it had come upon us. We found the hotel very comfortable, without a karaoke bar in sight! We went out to a Buddhist Stupa and Hindu Temples. As Saturday is the Nepalese day off, the roads, we were told, were not so busy, although they seemed very, very busy and jam-packed with bicycles and motorbikes as well as cars. We had a great rooftop meal (choosing vegetarian curry as we were told eating meat could be risky) overlooking the huge white Buddhist Shrine, in the middle of the part of Kathmandu where a great many Tibetan Buddhists had settled in exile. Again it was surrounded by fluttering prayer flags. We visited some mandala (prayer circle/ wheel) painters and were tempted, buying a wonderful contemplative and detailed piece of art in the shape of the wheel of life.



Our guide was a Hindu and when we came to the Hindu shrine we were struck by the loveliness of the buildings, how tidy and clean they were in the midst of the mud, dust and piles of rubbish that surrounded it. There were sadhus – Hindu holy men, skinny, loin-clothed, with ferociously painted faces - who had dedicated their lives to contemplation and dharma (escaping from the perpetual cycle of life and reincarnation). Funeral parties lined one side of the holy river gathering to cremate a loved one, some in the traditional white

colour of mourning, others dressed as for a party. Carefully prepared pyres of wood and straw were lit by the oldest son and the families watched and waited as the smoke arose and their loved one passed on to the next life in the process of reincarnation. Further down the river there were people washing and the filth on the banks seemed very challenging to our western eyes, especially as it was regarded as a holy river. Stalls selling the things necessary for puja, the offerings in the temples abounded as well as friendly men and women selling and bartering tourist souvenirs, from prayer bowls to beads to postcards. The Maoist government was holding election rallies and these and an open air rally led by one of the top Hindu holy men were attracting thousands of people. As we drove back we saw the cows being tolerantly avoided by the cars and bikes in the middle of the incredibly busy roads.



After the best night's sleep so far we had a full day's tour of Kathmandu, visiting more Buddhist stupas and Hindu shrines. Buddhists, often originating from Tibet, form about 20% of the population in Nepal and 80% are Hindus. We also saw a mosque and a Church, but Muslims and Christians are a tiny minority. We were impressed by the dedication of the people, the generosity in giving alms when they had so little, and their happy, open smiles. The spices, rice, petals and coconut offerings at the shrines fill the air with lovely scent. That evening there was

a huge amount of lightning, lighting up the Himalayas, and heavy rain swept through the streets pushing the rubbish and mud in chaotic heaps but clearing the air so that it felt fresh and clean, rather than the dustiness of the past week .



The next morning was very overcast and cloudy but we set off to the airport to be ready for a potential flight to view Mount Everest. I did not quite know what to hope for as we waited. A flight in poor weather

conditions so near to Everest could be potentially rather dangerous and yet this was our chance and the dream of a life time to see the mountain close up. The pilot decided to fly, so the 20 of us in this party, all sitting in window seats in the little propeller driven plane, hoped for a safe trip and great views! We were given sweets and ear plugs of cotton wool, a long time since those have been offered in other flights!

After a rather noisy and wobbly take off we were above the clouds and able to see the Himalayan peaks reflecting the icy sunshine. We were each invited into the cockpit to see the pilot's view of Mount Everest, this was an amazing experience, although truthfully it was not really that easy to distinguish which peak actually was Mount Everest and we did seem quite a distance away from the mountains, which although it was safer, did not quite feel as exciting as we had expected!! The clouds meant that we could not see the whole view, only the mountain peaks were visible just above them.

Back down to the earth and the coach hurried us through streets of cars, buses and bikes and children in smart clean school uniforms preparing to go to school. (I wondered how they managed to keep their shirts so white without plumbing in their houses!)



After a late breakfast of freshly prepared omelette, fresh fruit and pastries we set off for Bhaktapur, a village some distance from Kathmandu. It seemed medieval in its buildings. In the middle were Hindu temples dedicated to Shiva and others, and palaces for the Nepalese royal family (the last king is believed to have assassinated all the other members of his family in order to become King). The speciality of the village was pottery and crafts. We walked past open stalls selling meat in the hot sun and live chickens and birds. Our guide pointed out how the caste system makes life difficult for people as they have to keep to certain occupations, this means it is difficult to socialise with others especially those of a lower caste and all girls still have to have a dowry from their family in order to marry. In fact he said that when his two daughters were born family and friends came around to commiserate, thinking about the expense of a future dowry that it would take to attract the right husband!





We returned to the Hotel to hear the news that Osama Bin Laden had been killed, with television news scenes of American jubilation at Ground Zero. It reminded me of some of the previous demonstrations in other parts of the world jubilantly chanting death to America after 9/11. Not a good sight for the rest of the world! Outside the hotel security was immediately stepped up with military with huge mirrors to look for bombs underneath cars, buses and trucks.



Life is very difficult for the Nepalese, electricity is only available to those in cities who can afford it for a few hours a day, but we were cushioned from this by the hotel generators which would kick in noisily throughout the day

and night. People were also queuing all day for petrol as there were huge shortages, Nepal had not paid its bills for this fuel to India and India had been withholding it until they had received full payment. Still, all this seemed to be accepted and tolerated patiently by the Nepalese in their usual warm good hearted way.



Despite the rubbish, poverty and the chaos we loved Nepal with its friendly open faced people and its amazing landscape and its spiritual sense of life being so much more than material goods and property.

## Benedict James Wilson

Benedict took up the Senior Organ Scholarship to Magdalene College, Cambridge, in September 2007, and graduated in June 2010. He has recently completed his Master's degree, also at Cambridge, in Choral Studies. Prior to this appointment, Benedict was Organ Scholar at Bourne Abbey, as well as accompanist and conductor of a number of ensembles in and around Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire. He conducted Rutter's Gloria in December 2007 and Mozart's Requiem in July 2008, both in Bourne Abbey, featuring musicians from Cambridge, Bourne and London.



Benedict was a member of the Royal College of Music Junior Department for eight years, piano and organ being his principal instruments, winning, in 2006, the Baroque Music Prize and the Hedy Robinson Award for gaining one of the highest marks nationally for ABRSM Grade 8 Theory. He was fortunate to have studied piano with James Lisney, Aaron Shorr and John Barstow, and organ with David Sutton-Anderson. He is currently studying organ with Anne Page.

Benedict acts frequently as accompanist: ABRSM and Tripos examinations; recital work in Cambridge; and competitions, such as the Sir Anthony Lewis Memorial Prize Competition, representing Cambridge.

Benedict has recently taken up the post of College Organist at Haileybury College in Hertfordshire, as well as becoming ADoM here. In December 2011, he is planning to direct performances of Handel's Messiah in Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire.

He will be giving the Soundbites Lunch-time Concert on Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> October.