



K A T H M A N D U

Kathmandu

1. I GET a cheap room in the center of town and sleep for hours. The next morning, with Mr Shah's son and nephew, I visit the two temples in Kathmandu that are most sacred to Hindus and Buddhists.



Kathmandu

2. At Pashupatinath (outside which a sign proclaims ‘Entrance for the Hindus only’) there is an atmosphere of ‘febrile confusion’. Priests, hawkers, devotees, tourists, cows, monkeys, pigeons and dogs roam through the grounds. We offer a few flowers. There are so many worshippers that some people trying to get the priest’s attention are elbowed aside by others pushing their way to the front. A princess of the Nepalese royal house appears; everyone bows and makes way. By the main gate, a party of saffron-clad Westerners struggle for permission to enter. The policeman is not convinced that they are ‘the Hindus’ (only Hindus are allowed to enter the temple).



Kathmandu



Pashupatnath Temple, Kathmandu

Kathmandu

A fight breaks out between two monkeys. One chases the other, who jumps onto a shivalinga, then runs screaming around the temples and down to the river, the holy Bagmati, that flows below. A corpse is being cremated on its banks; washerwomen are at their work and children bathe. From a balcony a basket of flowers and leaves, old offerings now wilted, is dropped into the river. A small shrine half protrudes from the stone platform on the river bank. When it emerges fully, the goddess inside will escape, and the evil period of the Kaliyug will end on earth.



Kathmandu

3. At the Baudhnath stupa, the Buddhist shrine of Kathmandu, there is, in contrast, a sense of stillness. Its immense white dome is ringed by a road. Small shops stand on its outer edge: many of these are owned by Tibetan immigrants; felt bags, Tibetan prints and silver jewellery can be bought here. There are no crowds: this is a haven of quietness in the busy streets around.



Kathmandu

4. Kathmandu is vivid, mercenary, religious, with small shrines to flower-adorned deities along the narrowest and busiest streets; with fruit sellers, flute sellers, hawkers of postcards; shops selling Western cosmetics, film rolls and chocolate; or copper utensils and Nepalese antiques. Film songs blare out from the radios, car horns sound, bicycle bells ring, stray cows loiter questioningly at motorcycles, vendors shout out their wares .



Kathmandu



The Baudhnath Stupa, Kathmandu

Kathmandu

I indulge myself mindlessly: buy a bar of marzipan, a corn-on-the-cob roasted in a charcoal brazier on the pavement (rubbed with salt, chilli powder and lemon); a couple of love story comics, and even a Reader's Digest. All this I wash down with Coca Cola and a nauseating orange drink, and feel much the better for it.



Kathmandu

5. I consider what route I should take back home. If I were propelled by enthusiasm for travel per se, I would go by bus and train to Patna, then sail up the Ganges past Benaras to Allahabad, then up the Yamuna, past Agra to Delhi. But I am too exhausted and homesick; today is the last day of August. Go home, I tell myself: move directly towards home. I enter a Nepal Airlines office and buy a ticket for tomorrow's flight.



Kathmandu

6. I look at the flute seller standing in a corner of the square near the hotel. In his hand is a pole with an attachment at the top from which fifty or sixty bansuris protrude in all directions, like the quills of a porcupine. They are of bamboo: there are crossflutes and recorders. From time to time he stands the pole on the ground, selects a flute and plays for a few minutes. The sound rises clearly above the noise of the traffic and the hawkers' cries. He plays slowly, meditatively, without excessive display. He does not shout out his wares. Occasionally he makes a sale, but in a curiously offhanded way as if this were incidental to his enterprise. Sometimes he breaks off playing to talk to the fruit seller. I imagine that this has been the pattern of his life for years.



Kathmandu

7. I find it difficult to tear myself away from the square. Flute music always does this to me: it is at once the most universal and most particular of sounds. There is no culture that does not have its flute—the reed neh, the recorder, the Japanese shakuhachi, the deep bansuri of Hindustani classical music, the clear or breathy flutes of South America, the high-pitched Chinese flutes. Each has its specific fingering and compass. It weaves its own associations. Yet to hear any flute is, it seems to me, to be drawn into the commonality of all mankind, to be moved by music closest in its phrases and sentences to the human voice. Its motive force too is living breath: it too needs to pause and breathe before it can go on.



Kathmandu

8. That I can be so affected by a few familiar phrases on the bansuri, surprises me at first, for on the previous occasions that I have returned home after a long absence abroad, I have hardly noticed such details, and certainly have not invested them with the significance I now do.



A silhouette of a hiker with a large backpack stands on a mountain peak, looking out over a landscape at sunset. The scene is framed by a large, light-colored triangle that points upwards. The sky is filled with soft, orange and pink clouds. The hiker is positioned in the center of the frame, with their back to the camera. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

Thank you