

TRAVEL

Long Time Gone

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, TRAVEL WRITER PICO IYER WENT TO KATHMANDU TO FIND THE LAST VESTIGES OF THE HIPPIE TRAIL. *ESQUIRE* RETRACES HIS FOOTSTEPS TO SEE WHAT HAS CHANGED

BY CONOR PURCELL

Kathmandu is a dirty city. This much is clear as you descend into Tribhuvan International Airport. Helter-skelter mountain ridges jut into the sky, creating the sort of horizon a hyperactive child might draw. Above these tangled lines, deep blue sky; below it a faded grey, hanging over the Nepalese capital like a permanent cloud. Smog: the result of a million scooters, furnaces, rickshaws, cars and coal ovens sending their detritus into the atmosphere and blocking out the snow-capped mountain peaks that surround the city.

Iyer went to Kathmandu looking for the last stronghold of the sixties: a place “at the intersection of hippiedom and Hinduism, where Haight-Ashbury meets the Himalayas.” What he found was delirium; a city completely alien to anything he recognised. And it’s this sense of strangeness that still lingers amid the cluttered streets of the capital.

Kathmandu is often unfathomable to outsiders. Most of what you see you don’t understand: the countless deities and men with their faces painted in bright ochre; the jumble of space invader mosaics, Sanskrit signs, hidden alleys and temples that reveal screeching monkeys and sleeping dogs; the teenagers with kohl-rimmed eyes peeking out behind surgical masks, infants daubed in make-up. There’s a sheer weirdness to all of it.

But then Kathmandu has always been strange. From the early sixties to 1975 (when foreigners were kicked out in the run-up to King Birendra’s coronation) it was the last post on the hippie trail that stretched from Europe across North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia into the Subcontinent. The world was becoming smaller and the rise of counter-culture inspired young westerners to grow long hair and rebel



against their parents. Kathmandu with its gods and its dope and its air of mysticism was the perfect place to drop out, get high and forget about the world for a day, a week, a month, or a year.

But by the late seventies the world had changed. There was an Islamic Revolution in Iran, Afghanistan was invaded by the Russians and the innocence of the east – at least in the western travellers’ minds – had vanished.

When Iyer landed in Nepal, there was not much left of the sixties. There is even less now. The famous video cafés he wrote about – where locals would crowd around TVs showing the latest Hollywood and Bollywood hits – are gone. Now there are internet cafés, Western Union branches and music stores blaring out Jay-Z’s latest hits. Iyer wrote about hearing the songs of Bob Dylan. Dylan along with whatever passed for sixties idealism back in 1985 is long gone. Admittedly you might still see a few strung-out locals with wild eyes and dreadlocks smoking dope, but these men were always here – the westerners who came to Nepal simply joined in.

“The only hippies in Nepal are the Nepalese,” laughs Bidur Dangol, a slight Nepali man who runs

PHOTOS: HELEN CARTER



Vajra Books in the backpacker district of Thamel. His store opened the same year Iyer first visited. The place is cluttered with titles on mysticism, Buddhism and meditation. But when asked about his best seller, Dangol doesn't hesitate: "*The Da Vinci Code*," he says.

Dangol preferred the city in Iyer's time. "Now everyone looks the same, dresses the same. Everyone wants to sell you something, even when they have nothing to sell."

He is proved right a few minutes later. As I negotiate my way through the staccato streets of Thamel, a man with gimlet eyes and a "Boston Rocks" T-shirt sidles up to me. He is thirty maybe; small and gaunt. "Hasheeeeh sir?" he whispers. I wave him off. "Very good sir, you like smoke?" I reply in the negative, but it doesn't put him off – he has other goods for sale. "Rickshaaaaw sir?" Then he leans in closer. "Heroin sir?" I laugh and begin to walk off. "Sir!" His voice now seems desperate. "Balloon ride sir?"

If I were going to take a hot air balloon ride, it would not be one organised by a man wearing a "Boston Rocks" T-shirt who has just offered me heroin.

I doubt he would have any takers. These days the only tourists obviously getting high are trekkers, ascending to the mountains on tour buses with air-conditioning and guides with microphones. Those that are not there for the climbing are there for the "wellness". Nepal, for better and worse, is now an integral part of this multi-billion-dollar worldwide industry; a phenomenon as relevant to globalisation as Coca-Cola and Microsoft.

Yes, if the Sixties were all about dropping out, Kathmandu in 2010 is all about lying down: preferably for an Ayurvedic massage. Old hippies don't die, they just get facials. Spiritualism is now more about the body than the mind, with massages, yoga sessions and various tantric classes on offer from a few to a few hundred dollars a session. The Dwarika's Hotel,

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a splendid, sprawling, boutique affair on the outskirts of the city centre is as far from counter-culture as you can get. In the lobby, well-dressed Japanese trekkers stare at BlackBerries as they wait for buses to ferry them to the roof of the world.

I am one of the few westerners at the hotel – the rest of the guests are Asian: Chinese, Japanese and Korean. The Koreans stand around in groups chattering loudly, wearing the latest Gore-Tex and North Face gear. Sartorially the Chinese are more subdued, but equally loud, photographing each other in front of anything that looks remotely Nepalese: a statue, a sign, a sleeping dog.

I quickly figure that I'm not going to find any trace of Iyer's book here. So I spend my last night on Freak Street – once the refuge of those looking to escape →



reality, now a pale imitation of its former self, filled with Bob Marley and Che Guevara posters and restaurants promising “Italian Style Steak” and “America Burgers”. Most of the diners in these restaurants are locals, along with some western backpackers and older trekkers.

It's only when the detritus of this commercial scene fades from view that you get any sense of Kathmandu's lingering magic. As nightfall beckons, the touts go home, clichéd posters are taken down, and you can walk around the Old City at dusk unmolested.

Darkness falls quickly in Kathmandu. Streets empty, scooters, rickshaws, taxis and the crowds of people vanish. All that is left are barking dogs and small fires in the empty streets, which those that do venture out use to keep warm. Even in the half-light between day and night, Kathmandu takes on an otherworldly appearance. The mountains cradling the west of the city look like a frozen black wave never quite making it to shore. Before, when the light is brighter, but not too bright, the city's colours come alive: orange and reds, yellows, browns and blues; steam, fog, smoke and beautiful chaos. But at night, when the electricity cuts out and the streets are lit by candles and you can see every star, you begin to see why the hippies came here in the first place.

Kathmandu may not be the same as it was in the sixties, or even the eighties, but then the place was always about more than dreadlocks or dope. Iyer went in search of the Flower Power generation and came back empty handed. He didn't care. The city and its strange intensity sucked him in. Twenty-five years later, that magic hangs in the air. Kathmandu still dances to the beat of a different drum. **3**

NEED TO KNOW



WHEN TO GO

The rainy season lasts from June to September. The rest of the year is dry. Spring and Autumn are the best times to go. You'll find clear skies and crisp weather.

GETTING THERE

Flydubai flies from Dubai to Kathmandu from Dhs1,000 return.

SLEEP



Dwarika's Hotel

This sprawling boutique hotel on the edge of the city is a wonderful mix of restored brick buildings and traditional wood. Leafy courtyards and a superb Nepalese restaurant add to its charm. Recent guests include Richard Gere, Jimmy Carter and Cameron Diaz. Rooms from NPR 16,955 [\$230] (+ 977 4470770) www.dwarikas.com

Monumental Paradise

One of the few remaining guest houses on Freak Street, this is basic but clean and is the perfect location for exploring the old centre of the city. Nightly electricity blackouts mean candles are necessary. During the cold season you'll want an extra blanket or two. Rooms from NPR 400 (+ 977 4240876)

EAT

Snowman Restaurant, Freak Street

A sixties throwback, the Snowman is small and dark, but full of atmosphere. Famous for its cakes, it is one of the few places in Nepal that attracts trekkers, backpackers, locals and expats.

1905, Kantipath, Thamel

Beautiful interiors and world-class cuisine have turned 1905 into the city's restaurant of choice for visiting diplomats. A world away from the chaos outside, 1905 is perfect for a romantic night out. Prepare to pay Dubai prices however.

DRINK



Rum Doodle, Thamel

The closest thing to a tourist trap Kathmandu's bar scene has, but worth a visit all the same. A long time favourite of trekkers, even Sir Edmund Hillary has paid a visit. Live music and decent steak makes up for the slightly pretentious crowd.

Tamas Lounge, Thamel

As chic as it gets in Kathmandu, this place is popular with well-to-do locals and professional expatriates. There is an outdoor terrace and a smaller bar area that gets packed at the weekends.