

Travels with Cornelius

1986

Kathmandu, Srinagar, and Ladakh 1986



Cornelius watching Pappi's arrival at the old airport in Kathmandu

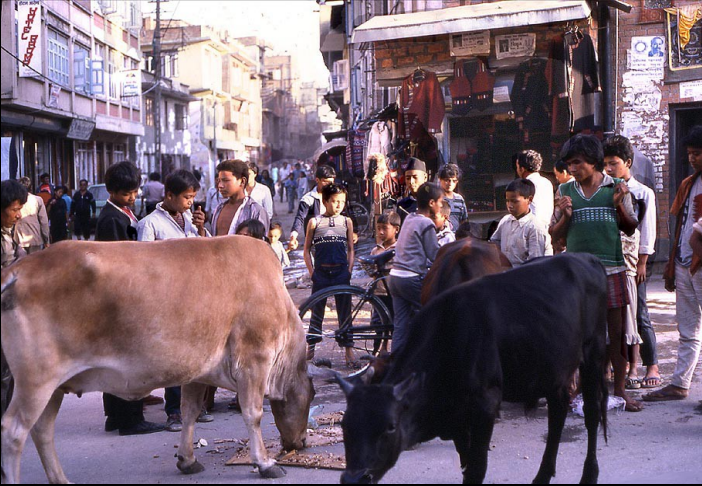
It was Cornelius who lured me to Kathmandu in June 1986. He had finished his research and published a paper with Fritz and had explored India during the winter of 1985/86 with Marc. In May 86 they had trekked up the Kali Ghandaki River in Nepal and were now tending their foot-sores in Kathmandu. I could no longer sit still, and emboldened by our success in pulling long strings, flew to Kathmandu packed with a new 2-man tent and all things needed for an expedition to Ladakh.



Marc left for home a few days later with a frightening hole in his foot...

Kathmandu Kaleidoscope

We stayed in a basement room of the Kathmanu Guesthouse, and on bicycles Cornelius took me to all their favorite places.



Holy Cows



Bicycle Rickshas

Inhabited by exceptionally charming people, Kathmandu was the most enchanting dump in the world: holy cows on the streets feeding on trash, ricksha drivers trying to cheat the foreigner, processions singing and drumming on any of the many religious holy days...



Children



Dogs sleeping during the day

...beautiful saris and extreme squalor in the squatters camps by the river, immeasurable treasures of antique bronzes in Patan, the ritual slaughtering of goats in Daksinkali, — the dying in Pashupatinath



After the ashes are swept away, Pashupatinath



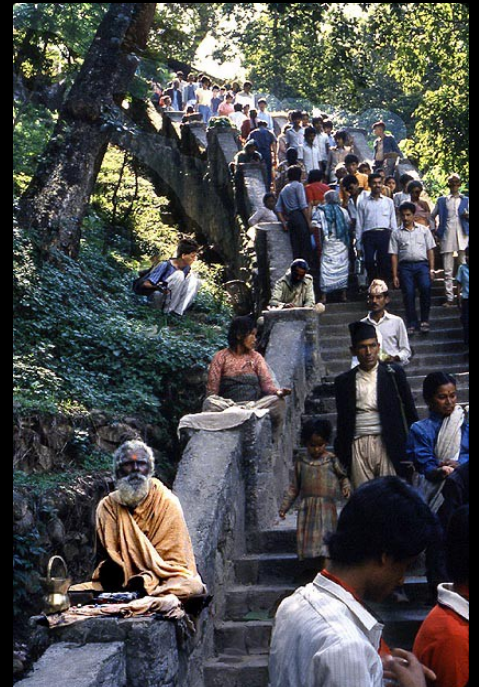
Miliktea on Shiva's Meadow, Pashupatinath



Dying in Pashupatinath



A specter at Dakshinkali



Cornelius in Daksinkali

Buddhist Bodnath

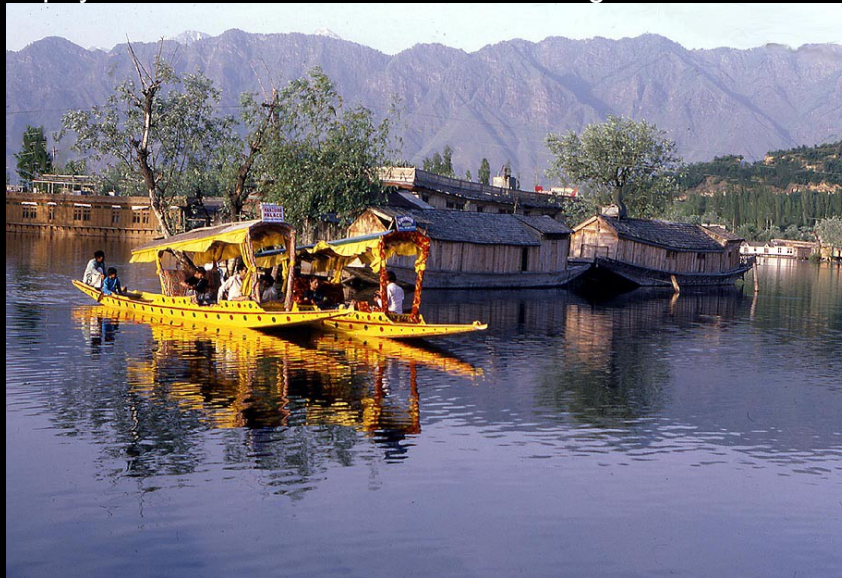


...and the eyes of Buddha watching you and this colorful life from the *bumpas* of the stupas....

Every time I left, I swore never to return, and every time I came back, I was enchanted anew.

Srinagar, Kashmir

In June 1986 Cornelius and I flew from Kathmandu to Srinagar, Kashmir to take a bus across the Himalayas to Leh in Ladakh. When we arrived in Srinagar we found that there were still 5-meters of snow on the passes. We would have to wait until the army had cleared the road. We rented a house-boat on Dal Lake with the name "Ark Royal." Its owner Mohammad turned into a very nice man - after he had found that we had the money to pay him. His wife and his beautiful daughter also cooked for us.



House boats and shikaras on Dal Lake. This was the view from our dining room window. The two shikaras in the foreground carry Indian "honeymoon-couples" who, behind closed curtains, cruised the lake in the evening, leaving a sordid trail of silverfish in their wake.... Our houseboat was less fancy than those you see here and it was much closer to sinking than we knew....



From the verandah one entered straight into our cozy English sitting room, in which we never sat because the sofa had only three legs and the little table was so rickety that one cup of tea would have toppled it. Next came a dining room where Mohammad and his son served us breakfast and dinner which the women had cooked every day, and where I told them Kashmiri stories straight from Rushdie. Mohammad was especially impressed by the one about the physician (Rushdie's grandfather) who had to treat the daughter of a rich man through a hole in a bed-sheet held by two ferocious women attendants. After a year the doctor had treated her every part but never seen her face. He asked her father for her hand — and regretted that for the rest of his life. As Rushdie says, my grandmother was a dragon. Further back was our bedroom and a "luxurious" bathroom with a European toilet and a shower with gilded fixtures — but no water. I asked Mohammad, he clapped his hands and his two daughters and wife

appeared and with a bucket from a hand that they heaved lake water into a large tank on the roof while

he directed the operation. Lake water would have been ok, especially in the evening when the water had warmed up, had I not had the feeling that not only the fish and the honeymoon couples peed into the lake... There was a sewage system on the bottom of the lake for solid waste, but was it leak-proof? Voices woke me in the middle of the night, was someone rifling our possessions? A streak of light was coming through a crack in the living room wall, and then I saw what was going on out there. Mohammad had pried up the loose floor planks and his son was busily scooping water with a can from the hold into a bucket which his father occasionally emptied into the lake: They were keeping the boat from sinking....



On the left is the "Ark Royal" and in the center Mohammad's personal boat. The blue shack contained the kitchen where his beautiful daughter prepared our dinners...

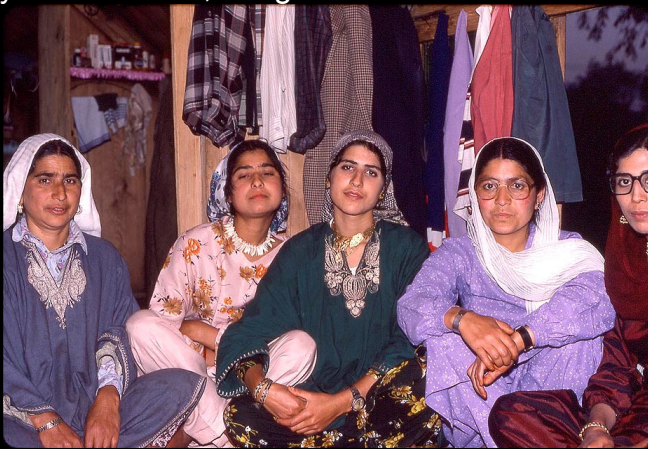


A Party in Mohammad's House Boat

One evening Mohammad invited us to an evening on his boat, a great honor . It was a genuine invitation and I accepted curious about how they lived. - The boat was spotlessly clean.



Here you see Mohammad in Cornelius' arms, his wife and three daughters, a befriended couple, and the youngest son. Everyone was full of mirth — and the women un-shrouded! The black purdah sacks, which they wore in town, hang on the rack in the back.



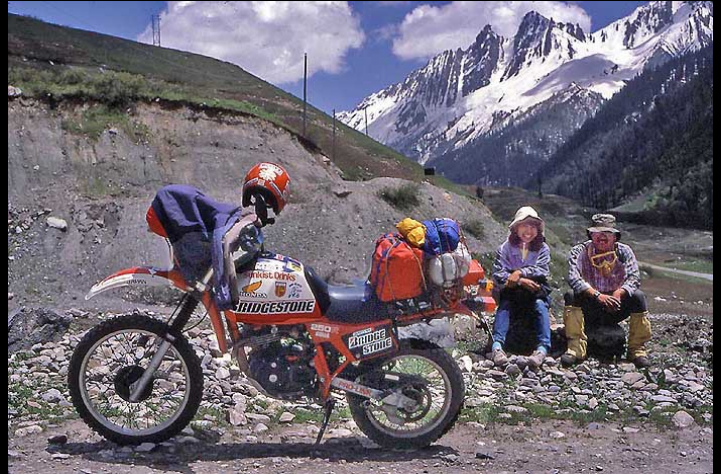
I asked the women's permission for a separate picture and when the flash was over and they rolled with laughter pressed the shutter a second time. The mirth would not end and then they dressed Cornelius in one of the black sacks. It had one densely crocheted net-window in its head piece and Cornelius went on one of his irrepressible clowning routines: "I can see you and you cannot, etc.."



For a week we roamed town. One day we had miliktea prepared by this crazed Sufi

By Bus Across the Himalayas

On the morning the road to Leh opened nearly twenty buses of all kinds left Srinagar. We had reserved two preferred front-seats on the *De Luxe Bus*.



The entire caravan got stuck in Sonamarg where the Indian Army controlled traffic on the pass road. We would have to wait for the military convoy, then for the downhill buses, and finally for any private trucks. We waited in Sonamarg drinking tea, having some lunch, and talking to an odd collection of people. One of them was this Japanese Kamikaze and his woman friend who had ridden his motorcycle all the way through Southeast Asia and planned to continue to the shores of the Atlantic.... At dangerous stretches of road she would take the bus. We stayed in contact with him for several years.



Buses climbing into the Himalaya



The first pass: Soji La, 3900 m

The trip to Leh took 2 days. We spent the night in Kargil, the last Muslim town before Buddhist Ladakh.



Mulbek Gompa, beginning of Buddhist Tibet



Bare Tibetan mountains at Namika La, 4500 m



View of the Indus on the descent from Fatu La, the 3rd pass, 3800 m



Amidst this wild tectonic jumble rises Lamayuru Monastery

Leh, Capital of the Kingdom of Ladakh



Leh and the Royal Palace from the Mohammedan cemetery

Mother Kiddar's "Palace View Guest House"

When we reached Leh at night I steered straight for the *Palace View Guest House*, which I had picked from the Lonely Planet guide book on Ladakh, and thus it happened that we met formidable Mother Kiddar. She gave us a very simple room for \$10, breakfast included.



On the right Mother Kiddar is wearing the traditional *tibi*, the Ladakhi Hat - and a Dalai Lama button(!). Because of the long animosity between Ladakh and Lhasa, the Dalai Lama has found popular support in Ladakh only in the eighties. Mother Kiddar, who was also a member of the Leh city council, was a vociferous supporter of "His Holiness."

Alchi Gompa and the Hemis Festival

There were two main attractions for my coming to Ladakh: Alchi and Hemis. To see the pictures from both you have to [go to my Website](#), there are too many....

Alchi Gompa

The jewel of Ladakh is Alchi Gompa. A modest sanctuary on the left bank of the Indus half-way between Lamayuru and Leh. The interior walls of the place are covered from bottom to ceiling with murals, the most beautiful and oldest (1064 AD) in Ladakh and Tibet.



The Sumtsek of Alchi in February 1989 with Barbara

Except for one bare 25-Watt bulb the three-story interior of the Sumtsek is completely dark and a monk watches that no one uses a photo-flash. He was very amused when I took a picture from Cornelius' back, full aperture, 2-minute exposure, and Cornelius pointing a Mini-Mag flashlight at the wall. It illuminated an area of about 50 cm in diameter.



Bodhisattva Akshyoba



Bodhisattva Manjushri

The Bodhisattva is the center of about a thousand smaller Akshyobas covering a wall of maybe 3 by 4 meters.... Considering their painstaking detail, this is *miniature* painting on a large scale. The painters came from Kashmir, where no comparable Buddhist art has survived, except for the lacquer boxes, which are still being painted by Kashmiri artisans.

From Alchi we hiked along the Indus to Mangyu to see another, lesser sanctuary. Unfortunately a case of Giardia had overcome me...



and dear Cornelius carried most of our possessions



The smoke-filled kitchen of a house below Mangyu where Cornelius found us shelter for the night. The friendly host threw a futon into one room as bedding kicking up a dust cloud which took half an hour to settle - while his wife cooked a supper of vegetables and rice for us. Back in Leh at Mother Kiddar's place I fell into bed, whilst Cornelius explored Tikse Gompa with some friends and brought back some beautiful photos.



Monks on the roof of Tikse blowing conch-shell horns

The Cham Dances at Hemis Gompa

In 1986 the *Guru Rimpoche Setchu* were the only religious dances held during Summer. The crowds, local and foreign tourists were large. We hitch-hiked there on a truck and camped with the pilgrims. The dances in the monastery's courtyard re-enact Padmasambhava's triumphal conversion of the Tibetans interwoven with the main Tibetan Buddhist (Vajrayana) tenets. The play lasts two days. The first is dedicated to Padmasambhava, the second describes the eradication of the human Ego.



The Padmasambhava and his entourage emerge from the Dukhang. The deep-throated long-horns make a lot of noise to to scare the evil spirits away. The gallery is crowded with German tour groups.



The dances begin. Two "Old Tibetan Kings" re-enact the history of Padmasambhava's first appearance in Tibet. The frightening, black masks carry viscera and cardboard effigies of the *Linga* (not to be confused with *Lingam*, Shiva's phallus). The funny looking, yellow-clad masks are itinerant Buddhist monks with their begging bowls. The dancing consists of ponderous stomping of feet to an accompaniment of sutra chanting, banging of big drums, cymbals, and long-horns. We sat wedged in among motley pilgrims





Unfortunately, towards the end of the first day Cornelius was running a temperature. I finally decided to put him into the tent to sleep while I cooked dinner for us — watched by the young people from the pilgrims tents nearby.



Our tent and Herbert



Would my pressure cooker blow up?

We had pitched our tent in a stand of poplars above the Gomba in the friendly company of pilgrims, who soon congregated in our front yard. The girls sang Tibetan and Ladakhi songs for us. Herbert, a bearded man from New York, whom Cornelius had already met in India, invented a lengthy mystery story for them, and I gave a cooking show..

The Second Day

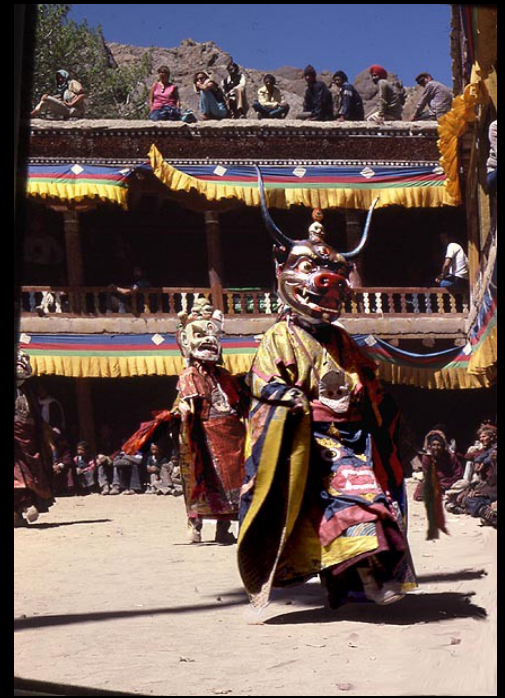
Cornelius did not get better and ran a mild temperature. - In those days I did not carry an high-altitude medical kit nor anything against Giardia. At the end of the second day I managed to get him back to Leh and took him to the Leh hospital, where the doctor assured us that he did not have a high-altitude illness, just a minor virus. I put him into bed, and Mother Kiddar made special Ladakhi tea for him and a rice soup for dinner.



Black-Hat Sorcerer



Tibetan Warrior



Dragpo following Death

The masked characters were the same, but the emphasis had changed to the competition for the Ego-Lingam between Yama-Death and Dragpo, the fierce manifestation of Padmasambhava representing the Dharma

This time I could freely roam the court-yard with my camera. The abbot and the German tourists were absent. This allowed me to take some rare photographs of the destruction of the Linga.



The monks prepared a triangular Sprit-trap into which they placed a bread effigy of the Linga, which Dragpo cut up with his Phurbu. He and his entourage then ate the crumbs.



Four Skeletons, the guardians of the cremation grounds of the four directions, began a wild, cheerful dance around the empty Spirit trap, celebrating the destruction of the ego and all evil....
Death watches, powerless.



On the last day before our scheduled departure by plane for New Dehli we sat exhausted near the Leh castle watching anxiously the coming and going of the military airplanes. Would our flight be able to take off? The air had become hot and thin. After a 6 hour delay we made it with white knuckles over the nearest 4000-m mountain. I flew home via Kathmandu and Cornelius followed via Hongkong a few days later.
More see:

<http://rolfgross.dreamhosters.com/Kashmir-Ladakh1986/index.htm>