



THE OCCIDENTAL TOURIST

Adventurer, explorer and lecturer of business economics at the University of the Western Cape, the legendary C Johan Bakkes finds the whole world is laughing



The view from a glacier in Nepal

‘**T**hat woman in the dress and bracelets is my dad!’ I heard my six-year-old son protest indignantly on the other side of the supermarket shelves. When I joined him, pushing my loaded trolley, he explained: ‘Pa, those people are looking at you and talking behind your back.’

My appearance has always drawn a second glance from strangers and has been a thorn in the flesh of my loved ones, since they could not choose me.

It’s difficult to describe myself. My mother likes to say: ‘He’s not exactly an oil painting.’

I was her first attempt – the other three didn’t turn out too badly.

Mother-in-law says: ‘If only the man would have a haircut and trim his beard a little.’

The dominee has been heard to say: ‘It’s not right for a deacon to wear bangles up to his armpits. The members of the congregation are liable to miss the collection plate.’

My wife says: ‘Why do you have to be so sloppy? Surely you’re not thinking of going shopping barefoot and in a kikai?’

Babies scream and grab their mothers’ breasts if I coo anywhere near them. Women give me a wide berth and teenagers exclaim in loud voices: ‘Hey, did you check that oke?’

Perhaps there’s a bit of wilfulness involved, because I *have*, on occasion, worn a tie or something black for a grand event. On the whole, however, I expect people to accept me the way I feel comfortable.

The only place where no one cares about my appearance is in the bush. Naturally I don’t care either, especially as my only use for water is to dilute whisky. That’s why I’m at my best in the bush.

Besides, there’s no time for frills in the veld.

Covered in six weeks’ dirt, we lay in all-around defence somewhere in Angola. Hiding behind a bush on the Kwando flood plain in the Caprivi, you fervently hope that the bloody elephant, no more than three metres away, won’t smell you. Or it’ll be tickets.

When you wake on the banks of the Zambezi in Zimbabwe to find a lioness peering inquisitively into your face, you suspect it’s your breath and not your scream that sends her scampering off.

In the Mana Pools reserve an elephant once stepped over me without touching

me, as I lay on the ground pretending to be a log. I remember the front and rear trunks dangling in front of my face. I was thankful that I hadn’t used deodorant for days.

Any chance meeting with people, however, is sure to result in open-mouthed astonishment and an undignified hee-hee.

Chipata in Zambia: youngsters crowding around me. ‘Jambo,’ I greet them. Pointing at my bandana and long knife, they retort: ‘Rambo?’

That earned me a nickname among my fellow travellers – Sylvester Alone.

Nouakchott, Mauritania: Islamic children staring at me as I sat leaning with my back against the wall of a mud hut, exhausted. Until their mother shooed them away in Arabic and apologised to me in English.

At the hotel in Katmandu we were enjoying a few beers in the garden when the staff began to file past, staring and greeting. It was only when the manager came over to inquire whether the one with the tousled beard happened to be a WWF wrestler – ‘the Undertaker’ or some such person – that I understood what the fuss was about.

Also in Nepal, we were heading for the Himalayan glaciers. Off into the mountains, blissfully removed from grinning ▶

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The Himalayas

onlookers. The only live creatures, apart from our Sherpa guides, would be yaks and isolated Buddhist monks in cliff-hanging monasteries and abbeys.

When we weren't thickly padded against cold of minus 20 degrees, I was most comfortable in my desert garb – Arab robe, headdress and staff.

Our trip was coming to an end. During the descent to Junbesi, a village on the Everest route, our guide took us to the Thubten Choling abbey and cloister, home to 400 Buddhist monks and nuns.

Here they isolate themselves from the outside world and study philosophy and ethics. They are serious people. They aspire to attain Nirvana. Their daily ritual includes hours of reading page upon page out of prayer books.

We had not bathed for 11 days. We took off our boots. Respectfully our guides led us into the prayer hall. The candlelight was dim. Incense was burning and gold statues of Buddha stood everywhere. It sounded like a beehive as a few hundred monks softly murmured their prayers. Dressed in orange or red togas, they were all sitting

in the same position – cross-legged, their bald heads bowed. Occasionally someone turned a page in his rectangular prayer booklet. 'Hummmmm-hummmmm.'

Their lives are spent in complete isolation, with no contact with their fellow man. Amazed, we looked at this extraordinary sight.

As he was turning the page, a monk gave me a sidelong glance. What he beheld was a figure from another Bible – a savage with long hair and beard, two kilograms of copper bracelets encircling his arms, a long staff, a white robe and red mountaineering socks.

Between the humming he started to 'Hee hee hee,' checked himself and resorted to 'Hummmmm-hummmmm' ... until, 'Hee hee hee,' it came again from the lowered head. Suddenly everybody was looking up and soon the entire hall was going, 'Hee hee hee' at the sight of John the Baptist standing there in the flesh.

At that very moment – to hell 'n' gone at the back of beyond – I realised that my children's greatest fear had become a reality. The whole world was laughing.

I received a letter today:

Hi, how are you? I am fine here. I hope you are well in there. Please convey my 'namaste' to all our four friends. I found you all very well people. I did many enjoy with you.

*Yours sincerely
Lakpa Sherpa*

And then suddenly I was back in Nepal. The land with the highest mountains in the world. The land with a religious diversity that makes you stop and think. A land with incredibly friendly people. Dirt poor, but with hearts as big as the grace of God.

We were four friends with time on our hands and some loose cash available, who decided to explore the land where Mongol and Indo-European finally met. With backpacks, we planned to venture into the wilderness – crossing mountains which our continent, Africa, can only wonder about. Foremost, however, was that we were not interested in

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the usual routes. We wanted to go to places where we were unlikely to meet another Westerner.

After a lengthy flight we invaded Katmandu airport like typical tourists. In spite of our bravado, we were scared shitless of what lay ahead. This wasn't our part of the world. Our reception in the strange land was warm and open-hearted. A luxurious hotel, by African standards, awaited us. Guided tours to Patan and Bhaktapur – their temples and culture – merely emphasised how surreal it was being here.

But the mountains were our true destination. High up in the mountains, the small plane arrived rather than landed. The pilot virtually collided with the short runway, surrounded by massive peaks. Shakily we got out, and Lakpa Sherpa welcomed us with 'namaste'. For the next 10 days he would be our guide, interpreter and friend. With only one eye – he had lost the other in an avalanche on the slopes of the Gyachung Kang mountain – he led us into a wasteland of snow, glaciers and ice.

Though the country is rich in heart-stopping scenic beauty and the people enjoy a wonderful quality of life, the average Nepalese is poor. Jobs are scarce. A one-eyed ex-high-altitude mountaineering Sherpa lives on borrowed time and every cent earned was accepted gratefully and immediately handed over to his people in the Khumbu valley. Their needs were simple, and staple food consisted of dal bhat – rice and a dipping sauce concocted from vegetables,

During the time we spent with Lakpa and his team we witnessed perseverance and endurance for the sake of economic survival that no Westerner can fully comprehend. Fathers and sons facing snowstorms in bare feet, with 60 kg packs on their backs, while we were huddled

together, wondering whether we would survive to see the next day. We encountered poverty, but also unbelievable goodwill towards others. People with less than nothing took us, prosperous Westerners, into their homes and offered us their last morsel of food.

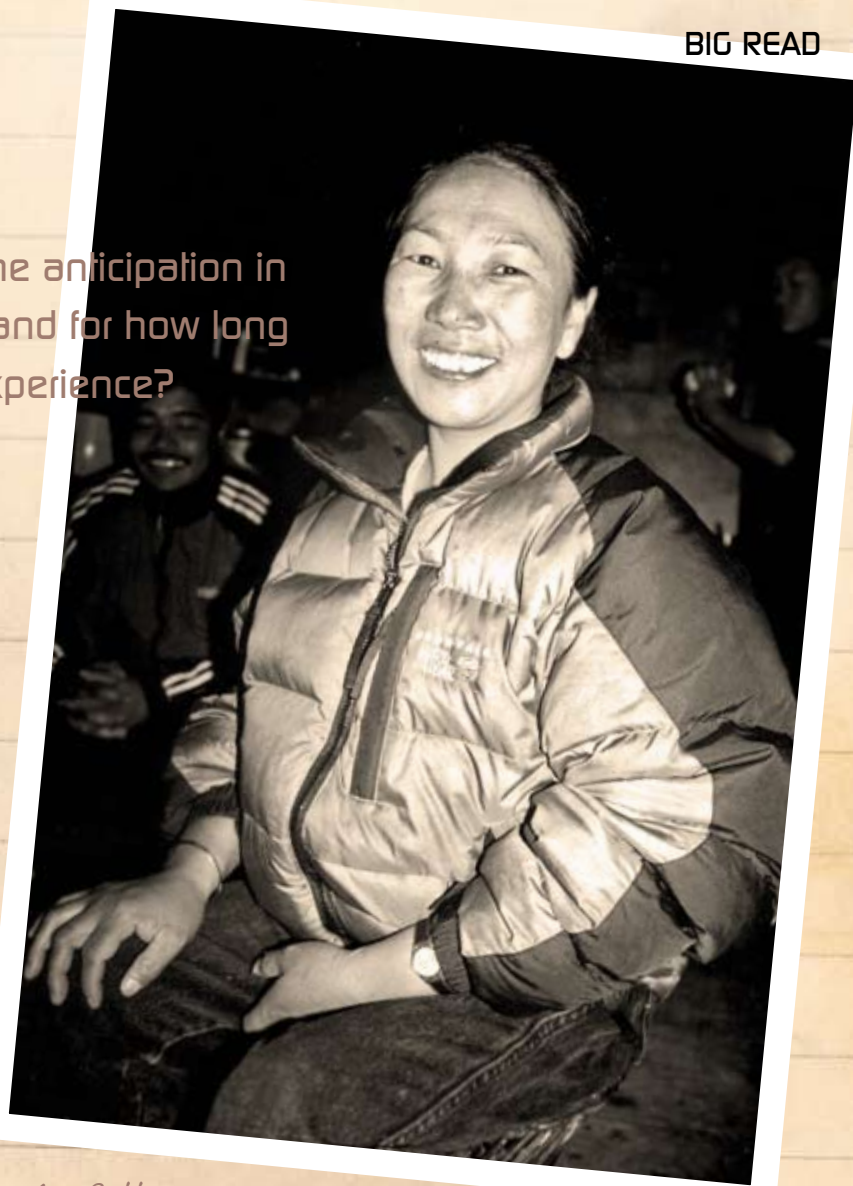
On our return we found ourselves back in Katmandu, the capital city. It was a riot of colours, sounds and smells. With the little money we had, we were able to buy a lot for the people at home. Pashminas were acquired for next to nothing and large quantities of beer guzzled. We were 'rich', and Nepal was on the receiving end.

A free day saw us book a flight across Everest. At R600 for a one-hour flight, it was costly even for us. We set out for

the plane. The four of us and a group of French organisers of the Raid Gauloises, an international endurance competition. They were all clad in African khaki. It was clear that the company was paying for their excursion. Last to board the 16-seater plane was a shy Nepalese girl. She found a seat diagonally in front of me. I had the lookout window on my side – at that price, at least you had to be able to see, I thought.

She was neatly turned out and had a small camera – just a little snap-shitter – that she was clutching in her hand. When she sat down, I saw the anticipation in her brown eyes. How much and for how long had she saved up for this experience? As the plane taxied to the runway, I saw she was battling to buckle ▶

My fellow passenger



up and I realised it was probably her first time in a plane.

Realising that my appearance usually makes women run away and babies cry, I leaned across carefully – before she could recoil with fright – and fastened her seatbelt. Her *'dhanyabad'* – thank you – was soft and timid.

The anticipation and excitement in her eyes made me feel guilty. Here I was, a tourist with money. And she, a native of this country, probably had to use her life savings just to be able to say: 'I saw the highest my country and the world have to offer.'

The plane gained altitude and I kept watching her. During takeoff she was tense but soon began to look around, taking a photo of the cockpit at the front. The French at the back were rowdy.

And then, on the left, the Himalayas came into view. It was an incredible sight, this wilderness of glaciers and rugged mountains. It was scary. I identified two peaks, Numbur and Karyolung. A few days before, we had camped at the glaciers and frozen lakes at the foot of those mountains. I became aware of soft breathing and realised the Nepalese girl was trying to see through the window, which I was blocking completely. The French were crowded around the other windows.

She tried to stop me as I got up to give her my window seat. No dammit, I thought, I may still return one day – and she would not. Of the rest I didn't see much. I stared instead at her profile outlined against the icy slopes of the Himalayas. It was enough for me to witness the joy and ecstasy this person was experiencing. I was told we had flown over Everest too – I hadn't seen it, but that was OK.

When it was over, she asked someone to take a photograph of the two of us. I laughed and imagined she would tell people that she had even come across a yeti.

Before we landed, she told me she was a teacher, whose subject was Nepalese history. In her country teachers were allowed to fly for free – she could return the next day, if she so wished. ■

To Hell and Gone by C Johan Bakkes (Human & Rousseau) is available from good bookshops for R197.

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