

# The Straton Family Trip from New Zealand to London

1982



by

Liz Straton

## AUSTRALIA

We have lift off! The great plane lumbered around onto the runway, clumsy like a sea lion on the snow. It hovered briefly then leaped forward, gathering speed. We strained for a last glimpse of Wellington – the scrubbed looking hills, surf breaking on Lyall Bay beach, wooden toy-houses. Then the jet lifted skywards, swooping up, and our New Zealand reality suddenly receded, became a toyshop landscape, its cars and people frozen into statues.

We have lift off...away from the house, the job, the cleaning, the packing. Away from friends, from Becky and George, standing at the end of the runway, shading their eyes from the sun, tears, watching for a last glimpse from excited little faces, little hands waving. Lump in my throat. Leaving them is the worst aspect of all this. Anna cries. "It is hard leaving Becky and George."

But then the excitement grips us, the great plane takes off into the blue....we see the harbour waters glittering below, high-rises like matchboxes, the Beehive like a pepperpot. We swept across the bare Wellington hills, and out over Cook Strait. Squeals of excitement as we spotted Picton, the road through Marlborough, Havelock and the wharf, and a glimpse of Pelorus before the clouds engulfed us. New Zealand was behind us, swallowed in cloud, hidden from the rest of the world.

Professional ocker good humour from the cabin-crew. Colour-in books and pencils for the kids. Good seats. Plenty of room. Tiredness swept over me. Feelings of sadness, relief and also of satisfaction. A good job done. Soon would come the first intimations of holiday. Mind free to be with the kids instead of tied up with three different things.

Aeons of blue and at last the Australian coastline, looking unsure of whether it was there or not – a thin strip of dirty grey land, then patches of water. Then the land again, soon crowded with houses. I scramble with baggage and bureaucracy, how did I get it all in before? Organize landing cards and passports. We're down.

Immigration easy for once. We get off early and the officials were still breezy. Our bags came through easily and they waved us past Customs. Out to the ogling ockers and a lovely brown husband who hardly knew me – I'd forgotten he didn't know I'd cut my hair.

Melbourne dressed up for Moomba. Persuaded the kids it was all for their benefit. Showed them the trams and lacy houses. Stereo radio on the Walkman. Crammed in together, hot and sticky, on the front seat of a huge ocker gas-guzzler. Collected some turkish takeaways. Unfamiliar names on buses.

Family again – a really good feeling – jokes, talk, kids racing around Dave's hospital-house with its endless deck bedrooms and echoing corridors. Dave's made-up beds in the nicest room for the kids – cool and comfortable. We're sleeping on mattresses in the living room. He's put roses on the mantelpiece. I feel welcomed.

Toby wakes us at 5.00 am (7.00 am N.Z. time). Later (at 7.00-ish) we try going for a walk but the flies drive him crazy so we retreat behind the flyscreens and I settle them with activities at the kitchen table. Good thing I brought insect repellent. It should ease things until he gets more used to it. More packing now as we get ready to leave.

We did the Australian thing with Chris and Brenda – swimming pool, barbecue, hot summer’s day, in a boring, boxy Melbourne suburb. Then went on to the Waltons sweating it out in a transit house at Royal Park. The kids had a great time, Anna bouncing on beds with Holly, and Toby, with headphones and automatic channel-flipper, ensconced on a foam-rubber seat in front of the colour telly. We earlier “took-in” a bit of Melbourne Zoo – Reptile House, Koalas and Wallabies, mainly. It is a beautiful Zoo – the lions for example, pad about in a piece of bush instead of a miserable cage, like in Wellington.

Our final night on familiar ground, with clean water, and flushing loos. It ends abruptly at 4.30 am when Toby, fully dressed, comes in to wake us “so we don’t miss the plane, Mum”. Lester drives us to the airport where we wait, shuffling through the various departure lounges before finally departing, Garuda Airways, into the far blue yonder.....

## BALI



The heat – you can’t fight it so best to let it envelop you. It’s like being in a constant sauna – pores open, dirt pours out. Now we’ve found a place to stay I begin to relax, get used to a life of nothing to do, except what’s around.

This is a green and peaceful place. Life moves slowly. People stop to smile and wave. Colourful little offerings to many manifestations of god are everywhere, presented in little baskets woven from fronds of coconut palm. I hadn’t realised how tremendously valuable a tree can be to a people – they make their dwellings by weaving walls from it, they carry their produce in baskets made from it, they cage their chickens in it, use the shells as ladles and the leaves as plates and spoons. On feast days and festivals they use it to decorate their doorways. They cut a long sapling and use coconut fronds and other red and green leaves to decorate it at the base. They have a delicate construction of stripped bamboo from the other end, a miniature temple the size of a swallow’s nest. In places the streets are forested with them, dancing and swaying gently in the breeze.

The kids are loving the sea. It is warm, and the waves look big and powerful like the ones on Sandra’s beach, but in fact they are gentle and playful like puppies. Toby surfs like a seal, his water-streaked head popping out of the milky white water briefly,

before he bounces under again, his body streamlined, taking the water with as much confidence as dry land. I remember a much smaller boy, not even two, racing in and out of the waves on a N.Z. beach, shrieking with joy.

Anna is decorous and nervous. Gradually overcoming her fear she bobs up and down in the tiny breakers at the water's edge before demanding bigger ones to splash in, and finally accepting a ride on Dave's back to crest through the big ones. Water breaks around her head but she copes, later her triumph is about "going under the water with my eyes open, Mum!"

We lie for a while in the sun, feeling its power. Coconut palms wave lazily, the surf pounds gently, the Balinese shiggle along the sand offering cold drinks, shell jewellery and massage "very good you sah". Then wander home along sandy lanes, through short-cropped paddocks where nervous thin-skinned cattle move closer to stare, then shy away, tugging their ropes and clanking their bells in a great kerfuffle. We climb through the hedge, admiring a kind of orchid, and the kids run on ahead, through the woven bamboo gates and into our compound.



Saturday

Yesterday we took a mini-bus to "do" Bali. It's getting difficult to record so many sights, sounds, impressions. I begin to value the art in travel writing, and understand

why so many of the brochures are so big on hyperbole. We saw rice growing for the first time, in flat fields and on terraced hillsides which give a dense, intricately patterned background to the whole picture, against which coconut palms wave and graceful people move.

It has the intensity of a dream world. I saw young rice, ripe rice, rice being harvested, threshed, winnowed by groups of women beating it on woven baskets, then tossing the contents into the air. Living history etc. It would be interesting to write the history of rice. Wonder if it's been done.

Our first stop came suddenly. Guys in uniform stepped into the road and waved out bus to the side. I imagined a drugs raid, but now, we were going to the theatre. Men in yellow sarongs sold us tickets and were highly amused at Toby's inked on moustache. Later we saw why. More yellow-saronged men sauntered over and joined a group sitting under a sheltering roof. Exciting tinkles & thumps were audible. The orchestra "tuned up". We sat under a majestic bamboo roof on bamboo chairs. More tourists dribble in, scattering around like ants, scavenging for the best camera angles.

We deciphered the story as best we could – the barong dance (enclosed). Then the overture began – fascinating music – a gong giving the beat, a chime sustaining the rhythm, then many instruments, gamelans tinklings, flutes and so on. On the way out Dave bought a tape.

The performance was excellent – to our untutored eyes. We thoroughly enjoyed it anyway. A combination of dance, drama, mime, opera, comedy. A kind of Balinese "Midsummer Night's Dream". The plot moved along well, the actors believable, even to Western eyes. The "monkey" was particularly good. I was surprised how much comedy it contained, I'd got the impression that Balinese drama and dance was pretty serious stuff. The music was far more responsive to the plot than I'd expected, preparing the way for the action and supporting the displayed emotions etc. Operatic, I suppose.

We just about had to fight our way out of the place. Skinny brown arms stuck through bamboo walls & screens to shove tapes, postcards, and replicas of the tiger's mask, dancer's headdresses etc up the tourist's noses. Buy buy buy. Their very insistence turns me off. I would like to look, and admire, but the pestering intensifies with even a glance in their direction so I keep my eyes on the ground.

Oh – Toby's moustache. Some of the "characters" in the drama had painted moustaches too. Everywhere went people thought it a great joke. By the end of the day I'm not sure if Toby did!

We have been wondering about the effects of tourism on the people. It seems to be mainly concentrated in the southern parts of the island, around Sanur, Kuta & Legian, but the taxi and bus tours carry its effects up into the mountains along various roads like dye spreading through water.

March 1982

Today has been really good. I had a marvellous sleep last night and felt very rested as a result. It was a particularly hot and sultry day. I took the kids to the beach and the Lentons turned up with Jonathon. They left fairly soon to organize a tour and we

ambled back for lunch, did some shopping and found some of the sliced N.Z. cheese the kids love. They were delighted with it so it was worth it, even though it was twice the price it is at home. After lunch Dave gave me a lesson in photography so later I went off to take some photos. After a couple of false starts, (forgetting to wind on, leaving the cap on) I got the hang of it and enjoyed myself composing my shots. Afterwards I sauntered around to see if there was anything else worth capturing for prosperity. There wasn't so I joined the others on the beach and discussed future plans. Dave and I have worked out what we want to do with the rest of the month and we've suggested to the Lentons that they might like to tag along for some or all of it because the kids are getting along well.

We decided to head downtown for the dancing, which wasn't on, but apparently the scene was round at the temple so we hurried around there. We joined the crowds watching a play. It was super. The kids got bored so Dave took them off for a meal but I stayed and thoroughly enjoyed it. I was sitting amongst hundreds of Balinese Hindus and I felt very comfortable. All the women and girls decked out in their best sarongs and kebaya's, with flowers in their hair. The orchestra wore brocade headdresses, the priests, in white, handed out offerings from a never-diminishing pile on a trolley to the endless line of the devout, who carried them away to deal with all the local spirits. The cast carried on against a background of chatter and general high-spirits. Grannies were much in evidence, carrying toddlers on their hips and generally keeping an eye on family affairs, but all in such a pleasant, low-key way. I have yet to hear a Balinese shout at a child.



The bamboo fronds, plaited into their fantastic and delicate decorations, swayed gently in the breeze, illuminated by spotlights placed high on some of the towers. Long elegant temple banners waved sinuously, echoing the movements of the dancer's hands. The storyline must have been very familiar, as many of the audience took little notice of any but the humorous parts, which I suspect were more topical and occasioned great hilarity from time to time. At the end the Rangda appeared, to terrify the little children.

16 March 1982

An amazing sunset, its radiance spreading over the whole beach so that it was like being inside a great golden bubble. The sea, breaking gently onto the shimmering sand, was like milk; the air seemed golden. People smiled at each other, all enjoying the radiance.

Then we had an unpleasant hassle evening. We walked miles for food and it was awful. Dave, who had been spoiling for a fight, decided to make a scene. Simon joined him. I got out with the kids and went down to Kenkana where we played cards until Sue and Johnny turned up. Shortly after, the guys arrived, flushed with triumph.

They'd paid something for the food but not much, and we had some pancakes at Kenkana, after another half hour wait. There is a lot to be said for not eating out every night, after all. At least food you cook yourself is ready when you want it to be, is what you want it to be, and tastes as you intended it should!

18 March 1982

I haven't said anything yet about Muses. We met him on the beach on 3rd or 4th day here. He was running into the sea with a surfboard as large as himself. He and Toby joined forces and a disconsolate and lonely Toby was transformed – he had found a friend. They bounced and bobbed in the waves and then flopped onto the sand, to dig holes and make castles. Muses speaks very little English but he quickly makes his meaning clear with a twist of his body, a gesture, a grimace. When you understand, a smile splits his face in two.

He is no bigger than Toby, slight but wiry. His body has the ability to bend and spring anywhichway, rubberlike. He digs a hole in the sand and stands on his head. The seas race up behind him and fill the hole. He emerges, spluttering, shaking sand and water out of his eyes and ears almost unfazed. He can do handsprings and walk like a crab. We encourage him to accompany us back to the losman where he plays with great concentration with pens and paper and Lego. Over the ensuing days he comes and goes, providing us with much interest and amusement, and being a source of increasing curiosity. Where does he live? Where does he sleep? Well, he is from Java, a Moslem, and he tells us his parents are dead. So he must live off his wits, if that is the case. Fortunately he has sharp wits. And how!

A greater mystery is where he gets his money from. The first time we meet him he wears old shorts and a shirt. But the pocket of his shirt is stuffed with money and he buys us drinks. (Fortunately I've given him a drink and a biscuit first). On following days he appears in smart clothes, brand new, one day he buys a shirt. After accepting the first food and drink from us he won't have anything else, but he buys batteries for the Lego engine and sweets for the kids, but won't let us pay him back. An embarrassing moment crops up when he wants to buy us all icecreams at the beach. Luckily Dave saves the day by explaining, with mime, what will happen if Toby gets a stomach-bug. Muses roars with laughter and puts the icecreams back. He does part of a dance which involves sticking his backside out and wriggling a hand around his anus. Oh yeah! He can also do card tricks, Indonesian boxing and karate, and lots more, I bet. He sings strange racy tunes – Dang dang da da dang da da dang da da dang, Dang dang da da dang da da dang – da daang dang dang, da daang dang dang.

He is unlike any of the other children we have seen. They tend to be quiet and rather submissive, obedient and hardworking. He is resourceful and gay, sharply intelligent and worldly-wise, but at the same time gentle and caring, tying up Toby's shoelaces and doing his hair. He has a beautiful laugh, carefree and light with something essentially childlike and innocent about him, almost more so than any other child I have ever come across. Is he a street urchin, or scion of a local wealthy family? Nyoman might know something if I remember to ask him when Wheyan is around, so that he can translate. Nyoman must be about the same age – Muses has told us he is eleven.

Muses turned up on Thursday with a battered red bike. Toby wanted a ride and discovered too late that it didn't have brakes. Muses showed him how to stop by

putting his foot on the wheel; then he wanted to take him for a ride. He combed his hair and tidied him up and off they went. I died a thousand deaths during their absence, but back they came, Muses dripping with sweat, but both of them laughing triumphant. They went off three times during the day and then Muses slipped away.

Later a guy staying in the end losman told us some people had seen a kid answering his description had been knocked off his bike by Bimo Corner and it looked as though his leg was broken. So today we found the hospital and sure enough, there he was, with a compound fracture and very miserable. We promised to tell his Uncle, as Muses very much wants to go home, so in an odd way I feel as if we have managed to repay him for his kindness, although not in any way I would have wished for.

We hired a bimo today and went to the Temple at Tanah Lot, built on an offshore rock. The Balinese are celebrating two of their major festivals today and tomorrow, so there was lots of activity. Crowds of people, dressed in their best, were making their way out to the rock-temple, across burning black volcanic rock, sculptured into odd curves and hollows by the relentless pounding of the sea. We waded over ourselves enjoying the cool waves lapping around our ankles. Just a few yards away great surf waves shattered themselves on the base of the temple rock. We left our shoes at the entrance and the yellow-robed priests tied temple sashes around our waists. We climbed up to the little temple, perched on the summit, and watched the ceremony.

An elderly priest, naked above the waist, with a stumpy grey beard, blackened teeth and the kindest face, prayed with ever-changing groups of devout Balinese who threw coins and flower-petals towards the altar. Another priest flicked holy water onto their heads with a marigold and they spread it down over their faces and necks – a cleansing of sins, maybe. Dave and I joined in, to express some of his gratitude at our being here, our being so privileged as to make this marvellous journey.

The whole scene was simple, gracious, graceful, relaxed. Very different from the constraints I feel associated with church-going in my experience.

After a reviving Sprite we set off along a clifftop path to a second temple about half a mile away. On one side, endless paddy fields, sculptured cared-for landscape, stretching away to banana and coconut groves against the skyline. On the other, wild rockshapes, like frozen liquorice, black beaches, shining naked boys leaping in the foaming ocean. It was very hot, a baking heat and I was relieved to reach the second temple and sit the children in some shade while I produced a few makeshift cheese sandwiches to raise morale and their energy-level. I left them colouring-in to the rapt attention of twenty or so young Balinese, and joined Dave in the temple courtyard, a scene of intense colour.

The women wore bright kebayahs and carried multicoloured trays of offerings, flower-petals and rice, fruits, pink and white sweetmeats, piled on top of another in fragile baskets woven from coconut fronds. Every so often a small troupe would leave the rest and with offerings balanced on towels wrapped around their heads, they would follow a priest to an altar or shrine further up the hill, for their offerings to be blessed. Afterwards they would carry them all the way back home to share with their families. Despite the riot of colour and animation, the scene was generally quiet, organised, serious, but without an impression of overpowering ritual. Mothers called softly to their toddlers, showing them the ropes, grannies exchanged snatches of chat along the



way, exhausted aunts flopped under awnings out of the sun, behind us a group of priests and their relatives enjoyed a joke – no, a series of jokes. Living religion.



This is a happy Balinese couple at their wedding. I chose this card because it shows several examples of the beautiful decorations made to celebrate festivals and joyous occasions. The round ones are made from coconut fronds and strips of bamboo and the long ones are made from leaves from banana trees which are shaped in various ways to leave green shapes behind. The “wedding cakes” at the front are actually meant to hold offerings of food and flowers, and the “tiers” are made by folding coconut fronds in weird and wonderful ways and securing them with tiny slivers of bamboo. The tall piles on either side of the bridegroom and bride were probably carried to the ceremony on the heads of female relatives. The pink and white balls are a kind of sweetmeat probably made out of coconut meat.



These priests are going to collect water from a holy spring. Most natural phenomena in Bali are imbued with magical or spiritual power. I chose it because it shows the “ceremonial robes” and the lovely parasols and palanguins, whose intention may well be to shade the gods and spirits accompanying the procession. The holy

water is used to sprinkle on people’s heads as they worship and give up their offerings to be blessed. I have also seen it used to sprinkle on the ground after a dance performance, by old men, presumably to cleanse the ground and leave it holy until next time it is required. Perhaps this custom began as simply a laying of dust and later acquired religious significance.

This child is a performer in the Baris Dance, which we did not see. It might be taking place at Tanah Lot – vis the volcanic rocks in the background. It shows the type of costume worn in many dances – white trousers caught by embroidered leggings to show the movements of the feet more clearly. Likewise at the wrists. All movements of the eyes, hands and feet are highly significant and convey



messages of religious - and other – meaning. This is the only picture of a boy dancer I've come across. I try not to get too frustrated by my ignorance as to the meaning of mime and concentrate on the movement and flow of the dance. It's a bit like watching some fantasy creature, a combination of butterfly and snake, weaving a magic spell and telling tales of mystery, the sort that end suddenly, and leave you in mid-air.

We spent a few peaceful days over at Lovina Beach. We went with the Lentons, squashed into a Bimo with three bony Balinese ladies, several cabbages, pineapples and other leafy things. At least there weren't any goats or chickens, nothing hairier than half a dozen coconuts! The driver dumped us unceremoniously at the roadside after a two hour whirl across Bali, up and over a mountain, with a brief stop at a colourful hillside market town with stalls packed with fabulous looking fruits as well as the more mundane carrots and onions.

We piled out onto the roadside, groaning and rubbing various cramped parts of our anatomy and looked around. We were outside a restaurant, and across the road were associated Losmen. We trotted around inspecting rooms and loos and finally settled ourselves in one rather grotty little cell with the kids in a room across the courtyard. They were delighted to have their own space and set to work arranging their clothes and belongings.

We later discovered a pleasant beachside bar, and that the food in the adjoining restaurant was delicious and cheap. Toby, Dave and the Lenton men organised a snorkelling trip for the morning in one of those dug-out sampans with outriggers – which was “sensational”! So the following morning Abdullah took us out again. It was beautiful out there on the mirror-like water with the mountains shimmering in the distance and the pattern of palm leaves along the shoreline. We could see lumps of yellow and pink coral sprouting on the reef like brain tissue and iridescent fish darting around or lazily drifting around.

Our fellow-guests turned out to be an interesting bunch, all “travellers” rather than tourists with much information to pass on. Trouble is, it tends to be subjective – one guy's hassle is another's sublime experience. I swotted up on Thailand, but basically on these trips you go it alone. Dave got into some good raves and we met some good people – they didn't have their blinkers on like in Kuta – trying to avoid the sellers, always watching for the main chance.

We met a couple of Australian Buddhists from a farm in Queensland. They got turned on to Buddhism at a monastery near Kathmandu. Guess what Dave wants to do in Kathmandu? They advised us to go straight onto Pokhara and acclimatise with our friends, rather than stay in Kathmandu straight away, as it is fascinating, but disease-ridden city – so we'll stay in Thailand until April 11th and then go straight to Pokhara, saving Kathmandu until later.

Lovina Beach is basically the backyard of a small fishing village. It's largely a Muslim village and very different to the Hindu villages we've seen in other parts of the island. There are very few shinnies, or boxes and bowls of food and flowers placed along the road and no gardens of shrubs and flowers – just beaten dirt floors and yards, and scruffy hovels made with matting walls and thatched roofs. There were a few warnings and a rather austere mosque. Hordes of dirty children and the women aren't wearing sarongs but mostly just badly fitting dresses.

They use the beach as lavatory and refuse-dump. Turds and rubbish float away on the morning tide. Women squat in the river to shit, men on the shoreline. A little upriver whole families bathe and do the laundry. No wonder their clothes never look clean.

They are very friendly though – a bit too friendly for Anna. They gather around to stare and chuck her under the chin. They want their babies to shake hands with her. She retreats behind my skirts. We resort to collecting shells with holes in for a necklace. Toby finds a tiny hermit-crab which clings to his finger, birdlike, until he drops it into the frisbee with a squeal. Immediately a dozen or so of the local kids gather handfuls of the things, blowing on them to make them stick out their spindly limbs. Soon the frisbee is alive with tiny shells gyrating and twinkling, their inmates appearing to perform an intricate dance as they scuttle for freedom and plop over the side back onto the sand, only to be scooped up again by many willing brown fingers. Eventually we let them all go and they beetle off across the sand, primer one escaping from the clutches of the school bully.

We are caught in the midst of yet another festival Nyepy – the Balinese New Year. Processions of men wearing masks and carrying flaming torches go prancing and shouting around the streets on the first day, and next door to us the boys yell and bang metal sheets – to scare all the local demons. The following day is “the darkness” – no shops or businesses open, no cars on the road, no electricity, no work allowed.

People are supposed to stay at home with their families. In fact lots of them spent the day on the beach. We missed our trip to Ubud though, as we had to wait until the following day for transport and that didn’t leave enough time before catching our plane out of Bali.

The Lentons pulled out before the festival and went on by road to the seaport connection with Java – they’re intending to cross on the ferry and bus to Surimbaya and Jogjakarta. We had a smooth passage back to Kuta and Dave found a really comfortable losman near Poppies – no cockerels, no dogs, no children, no motorbikes – and soft mattresses. We settled in and went to the beach where a great holiday feeling prevailed. We bought a young coconut – the milk was delicious. It was good to be back on the beach again, with the sand gleaming in the sun, and the surf running.

A little blond girl came to play near Anna and to hasten over the initial hesitancies on both sides of the relationship Dave went over to talk to her mother, who turned out to be a German designer of clothes for films who travelled for five months of each year to avoid the Northern Winter. We later had a meal with them at the only restaurant we could find open and Toby became interested in learning German, whereupon Barbara (the mother) invited us to stay at her farmhouse near Munich in order for us to learn some German and them to improve their English. Julia (the little girl) can already do pretty well in English. She had been at school in Australia for a while recently.

### In Transit

Well, the following day we packed up and headed out for the airport where we had a long and boring wait while tinny speakers squealed out Balinese music.

Finally we were off – sad to leave Bali, apprehensive about Bangkok but enjoying our little dose of jet-set life – the aperitifs, the food, coffee and comfy seats after bare bamboo chairs at our losman. We had time to kill at Jakarta – Dave tried to phone our Bangkok contact without success while I played Mother May and Granny’s footsteps endlessly with the kids, to the amusement of assorted S.E. Asian fellow passengers. Then into a Thai Airways DC10 to Singapore and Bangkok – a corsage of purple flowers for Anna and an excellent airways magazine, a good meal. We disembarked briefly at Singapore. Just long enough to buy a thrilled Toby his digital watch, then had to run breathlessly back. Another purple corsage, another round of drinks, food brandy, coffee. I could only manage the coffee but the others all accepted everything going. I stowed the rolls and butter and dried milk for later consumption.



Bangkok. Streams and streams of lights, mile after mile. A smooth landing, a quick getaway. Early in the queue at the Immigration desk, a good luggage pick-up, then customs to face. The customs men are pulling to pieces everything ahead of us. I pick up an exhausted Anna and tell her to put her head on my shoulder. Our customs man nods sympathetically and waves us through. Hurrah, it’s 10.45 already. I collect bahts while Dave fixes a room. Airport service taxi whisks us away – a bit expensive but worthwhile. We are speeded into massive, sprawling Bangkok and find our hotel – unluxurious but it has the basic necessities and a good swimming pool. We’re here and it wasn’t so bad after all!

## THAILAND

Our first two days are spent in Bangkok, meeting the Buhler's who are with the Mennonite Central Committee, mainly distributing funds collected in North America to various Thai aid projects (eg resettling refugees and rehabilitating prostitutes) and also supporting their own fieldworkers in Laos, Kampuchea and Cambodia. They are good people and offer much help, also a delicious meal in their small flat. Anna and Toby play happily with their children, who are aged six and four. We arrange to take them back next day but it rains and the streets flood. Apparently this always happens after rain. The city is barely above sea level, and the original klongs have been filled in to make space for roads and buildings, so there is practically no drainage. The people seem to be very accepting; shopkeepers put boards at their entrances, made watertight with plasticine! Everyone else rolls up their trousers and paddles away while the streets and pavements are awash with brownish, calf-high liquids, laced here and there with warm, smelly patches of sewerage.

Illegal street cafés crowd onto pavements and ugly patches of wasteland. Migrant workers live in shacks of corrugated iron next to the mansions and high-rises they work long hours to erect. Expensive cars roll by, spraying pedestrians with the brackish water. Dirty kids sprawl, sleazy Thai girls eye the men with dollar signs in their eyes.

In our “hotel” they pad in and out with hippie males whose eyes are downcast. At tables in the restaurant groups of “heads” discuss their nightly doings with knowing looks. Bangkok! Bangkok!

Dave spends the second day organizing visas, photographs, and the rest of our itinerary. He seems to have done a really good job, especially with the Indian leg, which was rather messy before. It’s his birthday and we spend an hour or two making birthday cards.



The following day we leave for Chiang Mai, ten hours away by bus. The wasteland and scrub around Bangkok gradually gives way to endless flat plain, dotted with trees sitting up on mounds, presumably the yearly floods have provided them with their thrones. Peasants with water-buffalo, skinny cows and herds of ducks work alongside the road in muddy ponds.

They appear to be fishing. Some are pulling nets through the water, some are plunging what appear to be upturned baskets – I’m not sure what that’s for. The ponds are sometimes surprisingly deep – up to people’s necks. In other places they are dried up and cracked – there are still some weeks to go until the rainy season.



We drive over mile after mile of plain. Occasional small hills erupt like pimples on the vast face of the plain. In places they are eroded into weird shapes, in others, covered with scrub and looking oddly artificial. We pass by clusters of wooden houses built on stilts with Ali-baba pots standing outside the doors. There is the occasional interesting town in which we halt for unspecified periods, during which nothing seems to happen. Then on again. One such town enlivens our interest with an enormous white Buddha – compete with breasts – appearing to repose on top of a row of shops. Actually, it sits and contemplates from a low hill-top. It must be all of 60 feet tall. On a second, higher, hill sits another, yellow this time.

Towards late afternoon the plain begins to shake itself into a series of small humps and billows, followed by scrub-covered hills. Our bus groans its way up and the driver shuts off the air conditioner to provide it with a few more ounces of energy. We stop again, this time, apparently, it needs a drink and one or two things adjusting with a spanner. The landscape darkens; we grind on. Finally we arrive, Dave haggles with a driver and he leads us off to our conveyance – a sort of Roman chariot in reverse, with bicycle power. It looks as though it would crumple under the weight of more than two adults, but the “driver” waggles his hands encouragingly and somehow everything is stowed. Dave and I can’t both sit on the seat so he sits on Toby’s backpack with Toby on his knee and holds the strap of one of the big packs, which is balanced piggyback on the other, on the dickey. I clutch my handbag under one arm, put the travel bag between my knees, Dave’s leather bag on my feet and Anna on my lap. Dave squeezes the food bag into the general tangle of limbs, “the driver” delicately manoeuvres his

equipment into the traffic stream, onlooking Thais are incredulous (at least, I think that is what they are....) and we're off!

Chiang Mai is a different world from Bangkok – no traffic fumes, garbage, high-rises. The bright lights here come from street markets and the place has an unfrenetic, charming, provincial air to it. We sign into a pleasant guesthouse at half the price of the depressing Atlanta and have a good meal and several glasses of clear, cold, delicious water! Dave and the kids collapse, I go out to explore, and quickly find an excellent market with so many beautiful things. People are friendly, no one hassles me. It is a good scene.

We will enjoy this place. The following day Dave arranges a three-day trek to start on Saturday, and a couple of short tours for today and tomorrow. We are a bit wary about today's tour, to see various workshops around Chiang Mai, as these can be little more than souvenir-crawls but our Thai guide assures there will be good workshops to view, and she's right. First of all we go to a silverware workshop and watch the artisans and craftsmen heating and melting and beating the silver, which is mostly obtained from Indian and Burmese coins. When they make bowls they hammer the silver out into the shape they want, then draw a stencil on the picture or pattern while the bowl is filled with stuffing to help keep the described shape, but soft enough to allow the design to be tapped in with a series of small tools. The chap's don't seem to be aiming for any productivity medals though. One is asleep, and many others only take up their tools as they see tourists approaching.

Our next stop is a lacquerware factory. The basic shapes are made from teak or from strips of bamboo curled around and coated in gum. They are then coated several times with lacquer and allowed to harden. Afterwards skilled women apply gold leaf decorations or delicate paintings with deftly placed blobs to form strings of leaves and flowers. It is attractive stuff but not really our cup of tea so on we go to the umbrella factory.

Here they take bark from the Sa tree and boil it for 2 – 3 hours, after which it is beaten to further break down the fibre. Then it is put into large tanks of water and stirred. A mesh plate is then slid into the tank and lifted up so that a thin coat of Sa is caught on the plate after the water seeps through the mesh. These plates are then placed in the sun to dry and the resulting sheets of Sa paper used to make a strong, water resistant covering for the bamboo framework.

The framework is made out of a central stem with two series of radiating spokes, one at the top and one several inches below which are angled so that they interlace and are then fastened together with thin cord. The framework can then be opened and closed by moving the cog up and down the stem.

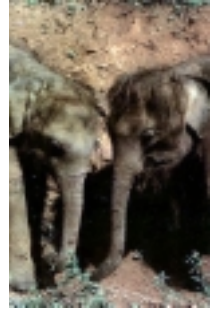
The cover is then fixed to the top set of radial spokes and decorated. Covers are made of satin or Sa paper and decorated with flowers, birds, Chinese characters and country scenes. Some have silk fringes attached. We bought Anna a tiny yellow satin one for her dolls, and we also chose a large dusky-pink Sa paper one for a rather dramatic lampshade!

We also went to a woodcarving factory, but by then we were sated, hot and tired. I remember elephants on everything, and thinking that the Thai sense of design is different to that of the Balinese, and to our mind, not so good.

## ELEPHANT TRAINING CAMP

When we arrived the great beasts were just pondering down into the river for their morning bath. Their trainers perched on their necks and skipped nimbly from side to side as the elephants carefully flopped themselves down into the water. One preferred to stand up and take a shower, sucking the water up with his trunk and then sending it shooting over his back. There was a baby elephant there as well still covered with tough, wry black hair. The Thai's think this hair is lucky, and like to have a ring made from it.

Elephants are trained from the age of four, and “graduate” at 14 to work for 25 – 30 years in the Teak forests. They learn to wear harness, and drag logs on chains, to lift logs with their heads, trunks and tusks. They also learn to work in pairs as part of a team. It was pretty impressive to watch those massive heads straining to lift 50' long tree trunks and place them on top of piles of other logs. Their Karen tribe trainers teach them to obey foot pressure behind their ears and a variety of spoken commands.



We also had a ride on an elephant, sitting on a little wooden seat not unlike a garden seat. It was a little like riding a carhorse only more so – very lurch-y. I'm surprised the Rajahs and Sahibs of yesteryear managed to look as dignified as they did, considering how bumped-about one gets! One elephant smacked Toby with its trunk, which gave him a fright, but lead to both kids getting a free ride!

## TREK TO VISIT HILL TRIBES OF BURMESE BORDER

We piled into a small truck and bowled off through town to pick up fellow-trekkers – more and more and more of them. At some point Anna and I were hauled out and put in the front where I had my leg up against the hot engine and my thigh thudded with a gear lever every time the somewhat taciturn diver changed down. Later Dave joined us and we sweated our way towards the Burmese border. Four hours later, tired and crumpled, we were tumbled out by the river at Tao Tun and shooed into a restaurant for a somewhat limited lunch and the inevitable, but thoroughly welcome, fizzy drinks.

They were to become ever more welcome over the following three days as we trudged through the dusty, smoky countryside. The local farmers and hill tribes people engage in a somewhat destructive form of agriculture called slash-and-burn, where during the dry season they hack off all the vegetation and their animals chew up anything green. Towards the end of the dry season (around now) they burn off everything and anything left – including any remaining trees –, which may be their banana and coconut supplies! Then they plant all the cleared ground and wait for the rains. How long this can continue is debatable, and it really makes for an unpleasant atmosphere – dry and smoky and hazy, which combined with a few inches of dust, causes the rush for fizzy drinks at every village shop. Anyway enough of that.

We trailed along dusty tracks, through bare countryside and empty paddy fields, passing the occasional scruffy village where dirty kids crowded around asking for baht. Some wore remnants of colourful costumes and posed for photos if any one of us so much as touched a camera.

We looked at an instrument for breaking down rice-husk consisting of about half a tree lifted by force at one end so that the other can sock down upon the rice contained in a hollowed-out tree trunk. Our guide asked a sulky looking girl to show us how it operated but she told him to f-off in Lahu in no uncertain terms so our party beat a hasty retreat, no doubt thinking of stone tomahawks splitting scalps, and poisoned arrows and what have you.

We trotted off back to the thoroughly beaten track and trudged on into the smokily gathering dusk until we reached a motley collection of huts perched on the side of an arid hillside. By the time Anna and I arrived, the rest of the party had swigged their cokes and dispersed to their “hotels”. We trailed after them and found our lodgings – an empty granary complete with assorted insects and rats. We were given mattresses the thickness of washing-up cloths and decided that this would be a night for Serepax.

Having survived the day (which had also included a hour’s trip down a shallow muddy river) in a sort of dug out canoe, with a large engine – noisy and smelly as well – occasionally grinding against unseen dangers beneath the surface. It reminded me of that brief trip in Dave’s canoe on the Frogmore Creek, with it’s unpleasant but not totally unexpected conclusion and I hoped our 1982 version would have a happier ending. It did, but not without some excitements – apparently Toby (who went in a different boat) dropped his hat over the side, and as he said, it took him about a kilometre to convey to the boatman the necessity of stopping, turning around against the current and struggling back upstream to retrieve it.

Well anyway, having survived the day, I decided it should also be possible to survive the night and decided to soak up the ethnic charm and authenticity of my surroundings. True, the women were wearing very attractive costumes, courtesy of Singer, and the kids were similarly attired, but apart from that the living was reminiscent of the yurt in the early days – except of course we did it for fun – or something like that – and they do it day in and day out. Most villagers live in bamboo or matting-walled huts, similar to those in Bali, which I would have photos of if Dave hadn’t forgotten to put film in the camera!!



The huts are roofed in thatch and many have bamboo fences around them to give a little extra privacy maybe. We found out very little anthropologically about these tribes and I shall have to see if I can read up about them once we’re settled in England to try and explain the significance of things we saw.

Their costumes are certainly very colourful and their embroidery is fine stuff. They go for thin stripes of colour on their clothes, rather like the Tibetans, of whom more later, and apparently there is a Burmo – Tibetan cultural link – but I will have to do a bit of reading in order to understand it better.

This is a Lee So (or Lisu) villager in traditional costume. The village we stayed in on the first evening was Lisu and certainly many of the



people (and women and girls particularly) do wear these clothes – but not as glam as this one, they're generally “stripped down ready for action” without all the jewellery. But the design of the costumes is very striking and they make welcome patches of colour in the burnt and dusty landscape.

This postcard shows a Meo village-scene. Many of the sellers in the night markets at Chiang Mai were from this tribe. They sell examples of their skirts and other clothes at the markets and I was tempted to buy one but they were all too big and/or grubby. We did not manage to find out anything about the origin or meaning of the clothes, or how



they were made. The women weave in the villages using backstrap looms, and I saw some elderly treadle Singers but nobody doing embroidery or handsewing. Perhaps this is done at other times of year when it is not so dusty and dirty.

Apart from one or two large concrete structures all the houses are either split bamboo or much and the villages have a rather rundown ramshackle appearance. The picture below gives a reasonable impression of the scene and must be fairly wretched in the monsoon. However, we're told that they have some interesting local customs which help to keep their minds occupied... including the growing and smoking of opium...but verification must wait until I can consult a reputable source.

After a surprisingly peaceful night (after I'd turned my “bed” round, after a rat ran across my pillow) we rose, breakfasted, skulked around the village observing ethnic customs such as washing up and handling babies, and then set off. Our way lay across more of the previous day's landscape so I won't reinvent the wheel.

We had a couple of welcome rests by rivers, on our way to our next stopping place, a Kuomintang refugee camp. After one of these we were approached by what looked like a welcoming party. Six or seven tiny women, dressed rather like these,



accompanied by a number of small children, all came to meet us. All too soon we realised it was more in the nature of a raiding party as they hung bead necklaces around our ears and tied bracelets of dried beans around our wrists and quickly demanded considerable amounts of baht for their pains. It was a bit like the first contacts between European traders and “ignorant natives” – but in reverse. We were “had”. These women were members of the Akha tribe. They had wrinkled brown faces, miniskirts and long pipes. East met West, old met new, but I had the

oddest sensation of confronting my ancestors, hardy little folk with a strong sense of both survival and humour.

We finally managed to escape and continue on our way to the Camp. Any images I'd had of dismal rows of sordid tents, hordes of starving and screaming babies and scared looking adults were quickly dispelled as we cooled down, calmed down and began to look around. The "camp" was really a small town of neat dwellings – mostly split bamboo, concrete or mud, but they all looked in good repair and in the yards of beaten earth outside, some even had little flower gardens.

The nationalist Chinese who fled from China when it turned red have adapted extremely well, it would appear, and established themselves along a section of river on a hillside. They have cows and bullocks, pigs and chickens, vegetable gardens and paddy fields – and pineapple gardens. They have made a swimming hole in the river where the children play by the houses and have built stone walls in the stream to raise its level at various points along the side and carry water away to irrigate their fields. Groups of older girls are constantly washing clothes at a shallow point where the water flows over large flat rocks. Lower down their water buffalo wallow and their ducks quarrel and flap.

Over the top of their settlement is a large square with a big wooden building along one side and a "guest house" on the opposite side. A third side has a cluster of little farm buildings and a fourth looks out over the gorge down to the river. The wooden building must be the home of the village leader. It is also the shrine for the village. The chief's bedroom is magnificent with four-poster bed and floral bedcovers – and a rug on the floor! Elsewhere conditions are more spartan. We find that we will be sleeping on a raised wooden platform generously endorsed with coconut matting and small hard pillows.

After lunch the rest of the party depart for an Akha village on a hilltop. Toby goes too – best foot forward! Anna and I remain behind. I sleep and write to my folks and she dances around the square in her knickers, looking like a sprite, plays with kittens and chickens and sings – to the amusement of the local families.

It's soup and vegetables and noodles for supper. Toby and Anna munch reluctantly but at least they know this is really all there is. Supper is followed by Mekong whisky and Pepsi, putting the world to rights and an international singsong around a campfire in the square. Our party is beginning to cohere now – Truedal and Walter, Germans; Michel, every inch a Belgian customs official; Sylvie a pretty French girl; Thomas and Klaus, two German psychologists; a shy Dane whose name I've forgotten; Ian, Marigold and Greg, a family from N.Z.; Atis and Andre, our Thai guides; and the Straton family. We discuss the concept of a European theatre of war and the peace movement.

We sing rather self-consciously, except for Truedal who has an endless repertoire of endless German folksongs, all rollicking, all with long tongue twisters of choruses, and all, I think about the joys of beer drinking and long invigorating country walks. But perhaps I exaggerate.

A sudden rainstorm drove us indoors to the dubious sleeping accommodation but exhaustion and Mekong whiskey lulled us to sleep once we were sure the grass roof didn't leak more than a little bit. We woke, sore and a bit stiff but okay. Breakfast,

including plenty of hot tea was very welcome, after which we washed, packed and set off back towards civilisation. Towards the end of the morning, after a stop at a dirty roadside café in a filthy white Karen village, a couple of trucks drove up blared their horns and we realised, with some relief that they were our transport back to the metalled road.

For the next hour we bounced our way back towards Tao Tun, jammed in the front with an ex-member of the Shan army who told us all about the history of the conflict between the Shan supporters (nationalist, monarchist) and the left wing Burmese state, and the latest episode, the Opium war when Thai soldiers slugged hill villages and several dozen Shan were killed. However, several thousand are still alive and well, and bringing in the shekels by accompanying opium merchants down the supply lines into Laos. Another world, eh!

Another limited lunch at Tao Tun, another uncomfortable ride crammed in a truck, this time back to Chiang Mai, before a blissful return to our hotel room, showers, clean clothes, and a steak supper, with chips, not a grain of rice or noodle to be seen.

A couple of quiet days recuperating, buying and packing were followed by an overnight bus ride back to Bangkok which was uneventful except when some clown chucked a bucket of water into the luggage compartment containing our bags, with disastrous results for a number of the kids books.

Another cheap hotel – but it has a bath. I wallow and scrub at least twice daily to get rid of regular layers of sweatsoaked dust. Bangkok is sweltering, noisy and oppressive but at least not flooded. We get the hang of the buses and visit the Snake Farm, `s Silk Shop, the G.P.O. (for Post Restante – letters from each set of parents, most welcome), take a fascinating river-trip, ogle at the splendour at the Grand Palace and finally trail exhaustedly homewards on a boat not unlike the one in the centre of the picture below, past the Temple of Dawn, the Royal Barges, the Orchid Hotel in the world last year by a selected group of overfed businessmen), rotting house-boats swarming with people – we see one guy up to his neck in the dirty grey waters of the river, hanging onto a crumbling hull with one hand and brushing his teeth with the other. Huge black freight



barges bore down on us and we rocked in their wash. Our noisy smelly riverboat finally deposited us at the nearest stop to our hotel and we wandered towards the road, through a Buddhist monastery and hordes of small children who appear to live in packing cases by the side of the road. A last bus ride back to the hotel, a last meal at the Malaysia around the corner, thinking of the G.I.'s who'd thronged that restaurant and bar in Vietnamese War days. Another packing session, a hot uncomfortable, practically sleepless night, a 4.45 am start for the airport in a taxi, through almost silent but certainly not deserted streets – a woman, a child carrying a bundle, perhaps everything they owned – a gang of street urchins – women going to work. We raced out along the northern motorway, past the bus stops full of sleeping homeless, past the

pastel painted concrete-slab tenements, past the few remaining treacle-coloured teak houses, past the foreign-owned factories to the airport.

Deserted International Terminal – passengers drifting in, Indians in saris, Tibetans carrying bags of samples tied up with string, sleepy-eyed Nepalese, fat, white Germans – or are they Dutch? Middle-class, middle-aged tourists are almost indistinguishable from one another, group for group. This lot look remarkably like a load of Ockers returning from a jaunt to N.Z. I saw in 1980, on our way to Sydney for the R.A.N.Z.C.P. Conference in October. After a long wait we finally file through the last departure lounge and onto our Skybus for the next part of our journey – via Calcutta to Nepal!

Goodbye Thailand, country on a knife-edge, whose economy is riddled with corruption and non-Thai interests, whose image is wrapped in gold leaf, whose children are sold into prostitution, whose ecology is being wrecked for short term gains, whose society is wrenched by soaring divorce rates, whose religion is institutionalised and divisive, whose Queen is rumoured to be plotting to kill the Crown Prince, her unpopular son, whose southern parts are prey to bandits, whose posh hotels are the best in the world! How long can you hold out, how long maintain our juggler's act before one after another, your gilded balls crash to the ground? Maybe to the end of the present King's reign, maybe not. But I'm sure that Rattanakosin, the 200th anniversary of Bangkok and the Chakri Dynasty, will never be followed by a further celebration for the 400th!

## NEPAL

Even the flight into Nepal was eventful. Rising magically out of the haze-dust from the plains of India – the whole range of the Himalayas shimmered in the distance. More substantial than the clouds, they still seemed to rest on thin air, as intangible as the mountains of one's dreams. As the plane drew nearer to its destination and began to descend towards Kathmandu, they vanished – rationale explanation = height of plane relative to height of dusthaze and surrounding hills; mystical explanation = involves images of sirens, sentinels, some kind of ghostly messenger or harbinger – not of doom so much as a warning to be alert and open. Dave and I both had the feeling that we would learn some important things in Nepal.

We saw an amazing landscape emerge below. Hills looking like petrified versions of bubbling mud pools at Rotorua, with successive ripples of brown terraces cascading down their sides, here and there signs of erosion – Nepal is geographically young – then houses, orange, white, grey, glinting in the afternoon sun. It is like being in a time-warp – we are about to return to the middle ages. A shining white structure on top of a hill could almost be a medieval castle, but it's a stupa, the oldest in the World, and the gaily-coloured pennants and banners are not battle-colours but prayer-flags.

This flipping from perception to perception occurs many times for me over the next few days, as I begin to become aware of at least something of Nepal reality.

Clearing Customs and Immigration is an experience in itself. Scruffy wooden counters are hastily pulled into position as we approach and small brown men pull on their peaked caps and try to compose their faces into standard official expressions, but nobody's fooled. Our luggage is manhandled out of the aircraft, manhandled to the "arrival lounge" and dumped at its entrance. Eighteen or Twenty fellows, dressed in overalls with "no tipping" embroidered on the bib, and resembling a working party of

high-grade defectives at a mental hospital, mill around, looking obliging but apparently trying to avoid doing much work. The trick appears to be first to spot your luggage, then catch an eye and indicate firmly for it's owner to fetch a specific piece, extricating it from the general mêlée and lifting it up and over a small river of bobbing heads into your waiting arms. Incoming passengers further down the line, who are apparently conditioned to hydraulic baggage claim devices, wait fruitlessly for their bags to come gliding down towards them. But we have our experience with the Inter-Island ferries and small New Zealand airports to stand us in good stead. We have changed money, cleared Immigration, collected our stuff and marched off to the Customs hall before many have realised that this is a country of manpower – or rather women and bullock-power – Not even the airport is mechanised.



Outside the “International Terminal” a small brown leech attaches itself to Dave, intending to tout us off to some local hotel but we shoulder our packs and march determinedly in the direction of the domestic terminal a couple of hundred yards away. Undeterred, our tout decides to turn himself into our guide and instructor in the ways of Royal Nepalese Airlines. We might think that a telex to Bangkok confirming our seats on the Pokhara flight might mean that we actually had seats that day – but not so; the plane might not fly, there could be many passengers, our confirmed seats could be double-booked, at least.

All of which, we later discover, can be true, but remembering touts in other parts of Asia, and their propensity for doom-mongering, we press on and find the counter staff in the domestic terminal – a bare concrete shed – inclined to be friendly and helpful with what information they have – which isn't much, but such as it is, fairly positive.

Yes, it is intended that a plane fly to Pokhara this afternoon. About four-thirty. Yes it might not be full. The afternoon wears on. Dave approaches them again. Yes, we have seats, they are confirmed, so if the plane flies, we'll be okay. The plane does fly, it's a tiny 20 seater and we pile into old bus seats at the front, where Toby can watch the pilot and co-pilot work the controls.

Nepal is a most exciting country to fly over. Mountains, deep gorges, plateaus, steep escarpments lie below. Signs of habitation everywhere, even perched high on hillsides, but very few roads. Its mostly brown below with splashes of white, and cloudy grey rivers, running fast from the ice of the peaks beyond us in the haze. Anna drops off to sleep and does not wake even when turbulence rocks the plane. After a fascinating hour we begin to descend, circling over close-cropped stone-walled paddocks like in Ireland, with toy cows placed here and there, a man ploughing with two bullocks. We pass over a tiny hydro-electric station at the bottom of a great cliff. The water hurls itself over the cliff and crashes onto the power generators below. It must be quite a

sight in the monsoon, but only a relative trickle now. Enough to provide power only on alternate days to the town of Pokhara and it's surrounding villages, lying beyond.

We land safely, if bumpily, in the middle of a field (designated on the map as "Grassland Airport",) and there is Stu- Clark to meet us, looking just the same as seven years ago in Palmerston North. Soon we're in a taxi heading for Lamacha, the village where the Clarks live. Stu bounds ahead on a small motorbike. We see small stone houses, long stone walls, thin brown men and boys wearing jaunty coloured Nepalese caps shaped like brown paper bags, few women. (They're all at home or out in the fields doing the work). We drive through the Bazaar, a long rectangle edged with two or three stone buildings, mostly shops, with a metal road up through the middle and stony ground on either side, where stallholders display their wares. Those too poor to own a shop or stall spread their merchandise on old blankets on the bare ground. The taxi, a very elderly Corolla, from the days when they looked like upturned pudding basins, grinds on up the narrow streets, hooting grumpily to clear its way. There are faces everywhere, peering expressionlessly at us as we growl along. The houses begin to space themselves and the crowds thin out. Grass verges appear by the sides of the road, and long stone walls, laced with tiny green ferns, wind along beside us. Finally we drive across a common and turn off along a muddy track so deeply rutted that the driver has to pick a way that zigs and zags to avoid the craters and rocks along the way. We proceed so for ten minutes or so and end up by a small, neat two-storey cottage with a verandah along the front. There is Sue, also looking just as I remember her, with a chubby redheaded baby in her arms. Christopher. Jonah, a larger version with beautiful tawny red curls, is riding his bike on the wide grass strip that runs down from the village, past their cottage, to the boys boarding school at the bottom.

Over the next few days we relax, start to sleep and eat better, and prepare to look around. The kids enjoy the freedom and the companionship with other European and North American kids whose families are involved in development work locally. The Clark's house is simple but comfortable and attractive and they have gone to some trouble to make us welcome. Their landlord lives next door, in a hut with split bamboo walls and a tin roof held with down logs and stones. He has got so far into debt borrowing money to build the house he will have to rent it out to pay his creditors. Still, it's nice and cosy – his cowbyre (which is actually bigger than the hut he and his family inhabit) nestles right alongside the hut, adjoining the end where they all sleep. But that is the reality of poverty. And Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the World.

When one puts that out of mind, to look at the place for it's aesthetic qualities, it is almost always beautiful. I do not believe that walls and houses were placed where they are for anything other than utilitarian reasons, but the overall effect is pleasing and has a great deal of the charm of English or Scottish villages built predominantly in stone. The light changes minute by minute and each morning when it is clearest, we can see two of the Annapurnas, vast hulks of crag and snowfield, and the perfect arrow-head, Machhapuchhare, the sacred mountain, rearing into the cornflower-blue sky. The surrounding countryside is beautiful – a lattice of paddy fields, framed by trees, soft hills with orange or white farmhouses half-hidden in the trees, in the distance, blue and brown hillsides heaving up against the sky, and signs of valleys between, passes going further into the endless pattern of mountain upon mountain, away towards the snowy peaks and Tibet.

Mornings and evenings are cool, sometimes chilly, a most welcome change after Bangkok. Almost every afternoon sees clouds sweeping in from the North and the mountains. The first two days brought dust storms with the clouds, and we had to rush around the house closing windows and doors before everywhere was choked with the stuff. This was followed by rainstorms and finally by a few days of violent hailstorms. The ground turned white in minutes, and cows and bullocks galloped for cover, a couple of more fragile bamboo – and – thatch huts were blown away, and later women cried because their corn had been destroyed and they would be hungry. One can't escape the real situation for long. People here live on the edge of the abyss – “annual income Pound 1, expenditure 19/6, result happiness; annual expenditure, 20/6, result misery” is a fact of life around here, and the increasing birth rate is pushing the balance the wrong way, despite the fact that 50% of children in the 0 – 5 age group die, mostly from neonatal toxæmia and malnutrition.

Even at best, life is a pretty monotonous affair, especially for the women. They rise early to cook and clean, then go out to the fields to spend long hours preparing the ground for planting by hacking at it with a narrow strip of metal fastened at right angles to a wooden handle. Where this is insufficient, they break it up with their hands. When the grain ripens they go out daily to search for ripe heads and cut the stalks one by one, until the field is empty. The women in this village are lucky, water is piped here. In other villages, women walk for up to four hours to obtain water, and then return home to do all the rest of their work. They must also search for firewood, filling their baskets to capacity, and then carrying home the spoils on their backs by means of a band passing over their foreheads. They carry compost out to the fields this way too, made from buffalo-dung collected by hand (theirs) and leaves and other compostible refuse, stored in holes in the ground around their houses. The landless work in road gangs or as porters, or beg.

The men do little of the work, except ploughing, when they urge on their reluctant ox-teams with sticks and harsh cries, at the same time struggling to keep the single ploughshare in the ground. The oxen wear muzzles and resigned expressions as they wearily tread around the tiny fields. The women follow behind, one bending to break up clods, another scattering seed from a bag.

The days flowed by and we completed a fortnight in Pokhara most pleasantly, by and large. Stu was there the first week and we enjoyed his energy and had several spirited discussions in the evenings about life and work and so on. One day we walked down to the Bazaar with him, down a rutted track between fern-sprinkled stone walls topped with spiky red-flowered plants to keep out the cattle, and he told us about his visit to Vietnam. It is a possibility that he and Susan will be asked to go there on a longer-term assignment, as the Vietnamese liked his solar-drying unit, and the Mennonite Central Committee want a permanent representative there.

One day we went down to the Lake to meet some friends of theirs, North Americans working in Bangla Desh. We hired long dug-out canoes at the edge of the lake and paddled out over its placid surface to a bay on the opposite side. We scrambled out onto a grassy slope bordered by woodland, and met a group of women out on a foraging trip. Stu spoke to them in Nepali and they had a pretty spirited conversation, mostly about the other couple's adopted baby, a very dark-skinned Bengali. They could not understand why a white couple should want such a dark-skinned child. Stu explained, and their general opinion was that the child was fortunate to have found a good home and future. Doubly fortunate, in fact, for if she had been bought up as a

Moslem, she would have had to go into Purdah, and remain in the kitchen quarters of her home, unless she veiled herself completely in black whenever she ventured outside. The white women spoke with feeling about the unpleasantness of marketing, or even taking a walk, in a Moslem country, where the men gather to make sexual jokes and comments and the boys run behind, shouting and throwing stones. These women do a great deal of turning the other cheek in their line of business.

Another day we walked from La Ma Cha (the Clarke's village near Pokhara) to the Tibetan refugee camp on the other side of the river. It was a gorgeous walk, through the stony village lanes, past quaint little orangey-brown thatched cottages and small stone houses containing the simple possessions of the villagers – cooking pots and a

few plates, what you might call a basic bed, a selection of scruffy quilts and blankets, odd bits of cloth. Almost all the children are in rags and some have the fair hair of malnutrition. They look up at us as we pass, like Oxfam posters. Other children are rowdy and healthy, and scamper beside us, calling "Namaste, Namaste!".



After a while we came to the gardens and fields at the edge of the village. Rows of women, backs bent, hacked at the earth with simple tools and threw the weeds onto the paths to desiccate. They are preparing the ground for rice. Our path led along the edge of the river gorge, towards the distant hills. On the hills bordering one plateau are orange and white farmhouses, with black-framed windows, half-hidden by trees. It looks like a Cézanne landscape.

We walked along the edge of the ravine for a mile or so, looking down at the cloudy grey torrent below. Eagles soared on a level with our heads, out above the river. Old men in baggy white pants and shirts, black waistcoats and caps, tending goats, looked up as we passed. Women in plum-coloured velvet blouses and bright lungis, with thick cloth swaddling their waists, eyed us curiously. They are Brahmins, with rings in the side of their noses, and their ears.

We pass an isolated farm. Ragged filthy children, dogs, hens and the odd cow pass in and out of the squalid hovel this family call home. Flies rise like a shaken tablecloth from piles of dung outside the door as we pass. Are they too apathetic to care? Or are our sensibilities too nicely tuned? Hastening on, we reach a small white stupa marking the path down to the bridge. The kids are excited to see monkeys roaming on the rocks. We descend the zigzag path decorously and pass carefully over the swinging bridges, stopping to stare down at the racing grey water below. Then we clamber up the other side, through some shade trees planted in the lee of a low cliff, round another stupa and up onto another plateau, but rocky and arid this time, divided by low stone walls into large fields grazed by herds of oxen and water-buffalo. Our path takes us across



several of these close-bitten paddocks and up under the shadow of an escarpment. The whole valley is an exercise in geology.

After a while we came to smaller fields, also carefully walled with stone. People are working here, smaller, stockier, the women dressed in heavy grey or brown pinafores with gaily-striped embroidered aprons. They have the broad faces and slanting eyes of hill people, like the Meo and Lusa in Thailand, but their faces show keen intelligence.



These people belong to my century, not the primitive past. We walk in single file along narrow passageways between the four foot high walls until we reach a broader ribbon of track winding up and around – and suddenly we are there! A different world, breezy, cold, a startling sense of endless possibilities, like endless plains. Neat stone houses, prayer flags whipping and cracking in the wind. A crowd of stocky men and women in black and grey, with splashes of bright colour in their woven belts and waistcoats. The Tibetans.

We go to see their carpet factory, situated in a low stone building, part of a large courtyard. They are singing folksongs and look up cheerfully when we enter. Four or five sit side-by-side patiently hooking and knotting their thick wool rugs. We like the natural colours best and buy three, before wending our way peacefully homewards. The following day, a plump, perspiring Tibetan businessman in a pink shirt arrives – the husband of the woman who sold us the rugs, to conclude the deal and arrange postage. They will be flown (all being well) to England and arrive in a fortnight. One is to be a wedding present for Pete and Tina.

A fairish portion of the rest of our time in Pokhara is spent talking with Sue and Stu about the joys and vicissitudes of development work, reading “Asian Drama” by Gunnar Myrdal, musing on the issues of development in the Third World, decorating Stu’s office and being ill. Toby had diarrhoea quite badly and Dave was worse. Anna dirtied several pairs of pants one day. Only I escaped unscathed. We had to cancel our planned trek, which was quite a disappointment.

On April 24th we joined a busload of development workers on their way to their annual conference in Kathmandu. We are assured that though the bus is old and rattly, we’re actually journeying in considerable comfort. On the regular Nepali bus, we’d be sitting three to a seat, with the centre aisle jammed – standing room only, and crowds more hanging onto the roof.

The journey is quite fascinating. Nepal is very beautiful – rippling terraced hills, pretty little houses and farmlets, and beyond, the fantastic panorama of the Himalayan massif. Irrigation carries thin veins of precious water to small beds of vegetables. Acres and acres of paddy lie bare and empty, waiting for the monsoon. From time to time we see the kind of work that goes into creating land; the stony earth is levelled and then the stones are covered with brushwood and other dry matter. Finally manure

is added and when new soil has been created, it is planted and irrigated. On the fields by the rivers, bullock teams are already at work, closely followed by teams of women, planting rice.

Sometimes the road follows a river and occasionally we see a crazily shaking swinging bridge. One is twisting sideways and jerking like a convulsive, but a woman walks unconcernedly across. As we near Kathmandu and the bus begins to crawl up 2,000 feet of hillside, the air becomes increasingly dustladen, and gulps of water increasingly precious. After 9 hours in the bus we are tired, dirty and somewhat dispirited. The bus drops us on the outskirts of the city and we stare around with glazed eyes, wondering what to do next. Out of the haze drove a little orange car, which turned out to be a taxi – so we piled in and a few minutes later we were fixed in a hotel with hot showers!!  
Luxury.

Kathmandu turned out to be fascinating – like stepping back five centuries to the city of London before the great fire. No street lighting, little winding streets, tiny houses with carved pillars holding up overhanging upstairs storeys.



Children and dogs swam in the streets, women peer from upstairs windows, men crouch in the dust, playing carrom and having animated conversations with much shouting and gesticulation. Tinkling bells at our rear signal the approach of rickshaws and blaring horns force the presence of taxis upon us. We are entranced.

The following day we essay forth, darting into shops and admiring the jackets (jakets), bags, jewellery and so forth. It takes all morning to rubberneck our way down to the bank in the centre of town – interesting little alleyways crisscross with the main drag and claim our attention by the minute. A great tree with spreading boughs and drooping clumps of red-blossom leans over the street from the garden of an ornate, abandoned Rana mansion, its faded opulence contrasting with the stark horror of a leper sitting outside it's gates,

clothed in a dirty white cloth, both feet and one hand nothing but shiny nerveless stumps.

By the time we've changed money we're tired and hungry, and grateful to find a restaurant nearby. Cautious after our bout of trots in Pokhara, we order egg and vegetable dishes and fizzy bottled lemonade. After lunch we find Freak Street and Dunbar Square, where grimy youths edge up to offer hashish and equally grimy children run alongside us with arms outstretched, begging plaintively but professionally. Pimp-eyed youths waylay us to force our attention to their displays of mass-produced Tibetan and Burmese "antiques" but we press on. The streets to the left of the old Dunbar Square are full of little vegetable stalls and indescribably filthy.

The buildings around the square are of varying styles, from Pagoda-roofed mandirs through neo-classical frontages to rather attractive and larger versions of some of the

bigger farmhouses we saw around Pokhara, with wonderfully carved door and window frames and black beams – almost an Asian version of an English half-timbered cottage.

The streets running off to the right are a riot of colour, the buildings are dark red, and shops are set into their lower floors. From every available exterior space, it seems, tankas bordered with bright silk flutter in the breeze like a flock of brilliant birds. Gleaming jewellery and metalwork cram the window space and scruffy saffron-robed vagrants posing as religious do their best to attract the attention – and cash of passers-by. Westerners looking for – what? Hardly enlightenment from these rat-haired scavengers hopping about like magpies.



The following day we set about our sightseeing around Dunbar Square in earnest, and guidebook firmly in hand, we “do” the old Royal Palace. Some of the temples, including an early example of “high-rise” – a nine storied pagoda style beauty affording magnificent views of the city and valley from the topmost vantage point, which we reach by a series of precarious wooden stepladders, a cross between the staircases of medieval castle and the gangways in the bowels of a cargo ship. We are ready for lunch after all that and dive into the welcome shade of the “Yin-Yang” restaurant where we leave our shoes by the door and climb up various levels of floor to sit on velvet cushions around low tables. The effect is supposed to be mystic, “Tantric” and all that, but the loo is definitely, most unspiritual – unless the intention is to further enhance the emphasis on other-than worldly elements in the atmosphere of it.

If it is, it fails in my case, anyway, and Anna and I beat a hasty retreat out into the square to find the Kumari’s house. We go inside and a boy calls her up for us – or rather for the money he intends us to give him. A rather shy-looking pretty little girl comes to a first floor window overlooking the courtyard and glances down for a few seconds. She is dressed in red and her hair is piled up on her head so it must be she, as they say, but she quickly withdraws, that’s that.

The place is seething with small skinny males pushing various Nepalese equivalents of plastic replicas of Blackpool Tower onto us, so we shoulder or rather elbow our way out and back into the incredible centre of that incredible town, and take a rickshaw back to the hotel. Anna is disappointed in the living Goddess. She was expecting something like Cinderella in her ball gown, I expect, and the sight of a remarkably ordinary eight-year-old doesn’t impress her. But the poor little thing only appears in her gilded splendour once a year, so we must be content with the postcard!

The following day we board a bus for Patan, now a suburb of Kathmandu, but once the capital of a



neighbouring kingdom. We are jammed in for an excruciating journey like the proverbial cattle and realise how fortunate we were to travel from Pokhara in the missionaries' bus. Unfortunately it rains heavily and we skip like goats along the narrow streets, trying to avoid a soaking by from the shelter of the overhanging balconies. It's a pity, because Patan is even more interesting than Kathmandu. Narrow alleyways leading off the main "street" – more like a back alley itself – end in low stone gateways giving onto large and elegant courtyards bordered by rather beautiful terraced facades – monasteries rub shoulders with family dwellings and dogs, hens and urchins run freely from the doorways of all. Medieval Sienna or Florence might have looked like this.

We pop into a monastery reputed to be one of the finest in Nepal. To our eyes it is over-decorated and ornate, in the "worst" of Hindu excess, though it's actually Buddhist. The gold plated roof and other trappings were donated by a conscience-stricken merchant in the twelfth century. Four rather beautiful golden birds perch uneasily at the corners of the canopy-roof. We twirl a few prayer-wheels, explore a few dark and unsavoury corners of the monk's quarters, and dive out into the rain, following a map to the Dunbar Square, which is far more impressive than that of Kathmandu and includes some fine animal sculptures as well as an Indian-style temple in polished stone. Reluctantly, since the rain shows no signs of easing, we pile into a taxi, and head for the Tibetan camp on the outskirts of town, where we wile away the rest of the afternoon.

Incidentally, we also noticed one of the four Stupas, which Ashoka raised in honour of the Buddha, around Patan 2,500 years ago.

That evening we go to a "good" restaurant in the modern part of town, down the road from the soaring new railings of the now Royal Palace. The food is Indian and gorgeous, and is accompanied by ragas from a selection of musicians. We are particularly taken by the tabla – the one that provides the characteristic whooping part of the rhythm – it is most attractive, almost hypnotic, and a very sensuous sound.

Sunsets after five days are stunning. Possibly because of the dustladen air, the rays of the setting sun are diffused over the whole sky, which becomes almost copper-coloured. We see some remarkable silhouettes – pagoda roofs etched sharply against the vibrant orange glow, and trees with each leaf and branch traced as explicitly as a design for a piece of black lace. The air is also germ laden, and Anna and I pick up some sort of lurgy – mine responds to aspirins and rest, but hers grumbles on for quite a time and worries us not a little.

On our last day we took a taxi up to Surambwanath a famous Buddhist temple on a hilltop overlooking the city.

The journey there was like a trip through some pastoral landscape by Pirandello, but the site itself was less exciting than it looked from the valley. Skinny dogs and dirty ducks nosed through the rubbish and investigated numerous cracks in the paving for titbits, souvenir shops and racks of postcards vied with filth – and vermilion-encrusted temples and shrines for attention. On one side, tenement houses crawled up the hill and spread over onto the courtyard and children of their inhabitants wandered and defecated among the statues. Our guidebook explains how in Nepal spiritual and secular coexist, the one being an integral part of the other. There seems to be no concept of reverence for presumably holy places, and I suppose I find this rather

upsetting. But as I watch some Sherpa pilgrims moving around the central, circular shrine, praying earnestly and fervently as they turn prayer wheels and place offerings of flower petals and coins on the various altars, I have to accept that it has its own spiritual meaning for devout Nepalis.

The following day we take our leave of a fascinating land. It appears to me to be more socially intact, in the sense of its people continuing to live as they have done for centuries, than anywhere else we've been, but of course important changes are occurring and one wonders how long present-day Nepal can survive major upheaval. Overpopulation, deforestation, unemployment, dissatisfaction with the Panchayat system and its present, feudal *modus operandi*, not to mention poverty and disease, must be placing immense strains on stability, and China is on its doorstep. It must, however be a fascinating place for the anthropologist and I look forward to reading more about it – one of the greatest obstacles to development work in such a place, I think, is the lack of awareness of many Western workers, of the nature of the society in which they find themselves. What is the function of conflict, for example, and how is it resolved? Such information would surely be more valuable for people running a school such as the one at Pokhara, where the boys went on the rampage and smashed up the teachers quarters, then “guidance” offered by its present “adviser to the Headmaster”, a somewhat narrow-minded Ulster protestant with relatives in the R.U.C. committed to “fighting evil”!

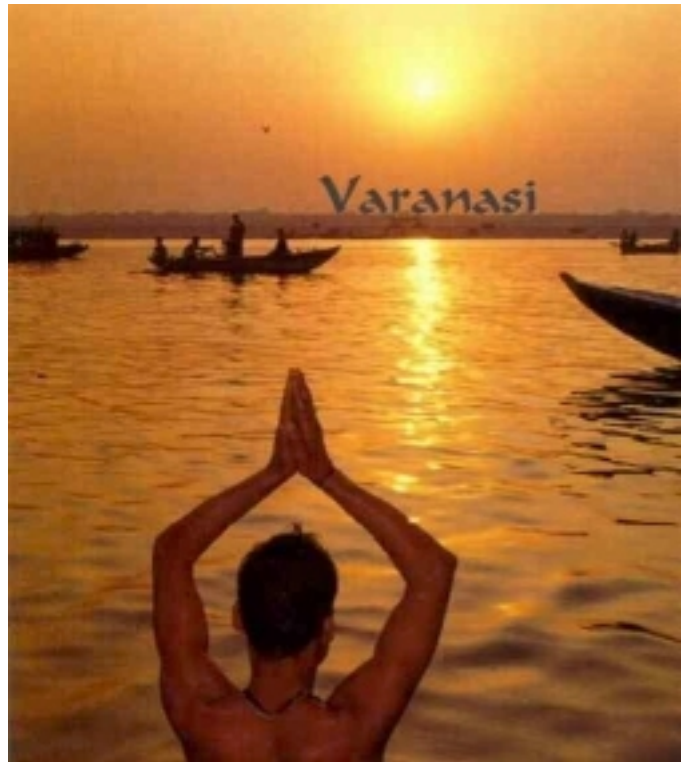
We are preparing for India – we've devoured “Freedom at Midnight” by Collins and LaPierre and I think I've found the “important thing to learn” – the non-violence of Ghandi. Why isn't it taught in schools? Why isn't he as important a formative influence in education as Napoleon and Nelson or Churchill? His message is truly revolutionary – as far as I'm concerned, Marx and the others are mere social twiddlers by comparison. I don't know yet whether I'd compare him with Christ or Buddha – I'll have to read him first. But certainly the descriptions in “Freedom at Midnight” of the way in which a commitment to non-violence held the peace in a succession of tense situations, when other parts of India were exploding into bloodshed, makes impressive reading, and its relevance to today's situation is clear – I think. I'll have to learn more first. Does it have a universal application for example, or is it only applicable to Hindu context, where a belief in reincarnation permits (perhaps) a more phlegmatic attitude towards death, and allows people to beat their chests to the aggression in the firm expectation of rebirth as something better.

## INDIA

Disembarking at Varanasi is like walking into an oven. A blast of hot air all but overwhelms us as we descend from plane to tarmac and we're grateful for the dubious effectiveness of the fans in the Immigration lounge. Six or seven attractive middle-aged Indian airport officials fiddle with our passports and papers, other less attractive wallahs order us around about our baggage and customs but basically don't really do anything, and we emerge into the public lounge to a clamour of taxi drivers and hotel touts. We adopt a severe “British” expressions and shoulder our way to the airport bus, which gradually fills up with airport workers – apparently our plane is the last one in that day, and they're all going home. The ride into town is long and unbearably hot. We sit hopefully by open windows but the air coming in is at least as hot. Anna wilts onto my lap.

The hotel is depressing and has no air-conditioned rooms available despite promises. We run into a series of petty hassles at banks when we try to change money. Gloom descends. Dave states that “this family needs a kick up the morale” and carries us off to a posh hotel with swimming pool. Uniformed lackeys everywhere, cool and comfortable. It’s going to be costly but worth it. We luxuriate around the swimming pool and take guided tours of ancient Buddhist and Hindu sights. It is quite the most weird and bizarre place I’ve ever been. Hordes of people everywhere, standing, walking, buying, selling, squatting, arguing, sleeping. Elegant and not-so-elegant bovines meander around, tracked by vigilant dung-scoopers, ready to dash up and scoop the steaming prize almost before it hits the ground. Super pooper-scoopers, they are! Camels plod along the streets with “we are not amused” written all over their haughty faces. The occasional elephant carries vast burdens unconcernedly down the highway, swinging its trunk. Noise, flies, smells, heat, religion, superstition, death. Hindus come here to die, believing that if they die at Varanasi, they will be freed from the eternal cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Funeral pyres smoke everyday on the ghats along the Ganges.

We take an early morning ride on the river, to watch the people joyfully acknowledge the rising of the sun, bathing in the sacred waters and so on. The riverside bank on the city side rises quite steeply from the water, and has adjacent flights of steps built from the water’s edge to the houses, temples and alleyways that cram above it. These are the ghats, where sick and dying Hindus come to seek a peaceful end. I saw a plump Indian pere demonstrating to his nervous teenage son, the proper way to wash off his sins – total immersion. The youth could not bring himself to submerge completely,

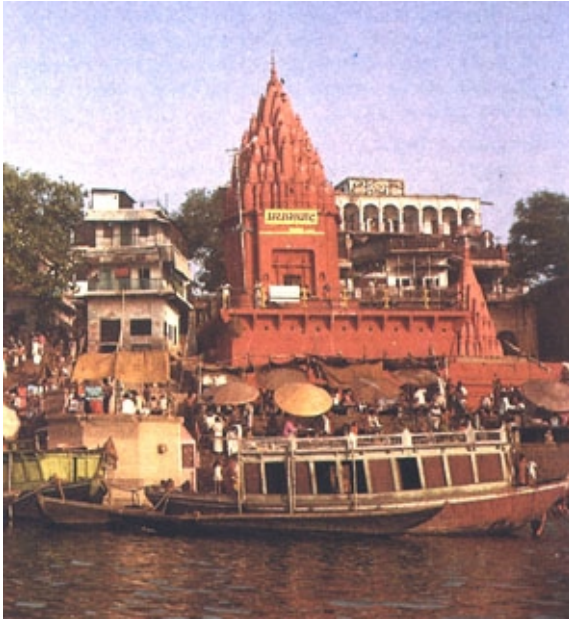


however, even after sticking his fingers in his ears and screwing up his face, with strong parental pressure applied to his shoulders. Further along, behind genteel, but inadequate, screens, a class of adolescent girls were learning to swim, most clad in the top half of their Punjabi suits, but some very daring in the sort of itchy woollen bathing suit that was regulation issue at St Winifred’s School for Girls in the 1950’s.

On another occasion Dave saw a wild-eyed, wild haired young man surround himself with burning coals, set a tray of smoking hot charcoal on his head, and sit – one of the tasks on the way to spiritual enlightenment? Or merely an unusual (to us) form of attention-seeking? Our friend of the Indian Army, one Major Nat, thinks the latter, and is very damning about the number of stupid superstitions indulged in by his simpler-minded compatriots.

Beneath the tall, stately mansions of the Indian Princes (who are rushed to Varanasi as soon as they look like snuffing it, to take up residence in these fine palaces, their last earthly abode) local laundrymen beat hell out of the city's washing.

Apparently the clothes spend the night bubbling away in vats of boiling water, soap – and lime, I think the guide said. In the morning they are loaded onto the backs of minute donkeys and transported briskly down the ghats to the river. There they are seized by remarkably enthusiastic laundry workers and given a terrific pounding on the stone steps. Our guide observes dryly that buttons and zips don't survive long under such treatment. Do they also get to heaven then one wonders?



We visit some sites and museums of Buddhist interest; see the famous column with the three lions on top, the enormous carved stone wheel, and various statues of the Buddha and an assortment of Hindu deities. Even when one knows their histories, I find myself relatively unmoved. I'm afraid, in comparison to my reaction to the lively tales of their Greek counterparts. The statues too are relatively static and squat, comparison with Greek equivalents, and do not excite me. We were, however aware of and impressed by the sense of an old civilisation with a history stretching beyond Christendom.

We inspect various places of worship, including the famous Golden Temple, and Durgha's Temple, inhabited by a collection of squabbling, nit-picking monkeys. We scuttle along alleyways reminiscent of Denis Potter thrillers, fastidiously avoiding the filth and the mangy dogs. Rats scamper to and fro. It is a confused jumble of wailing flutes, flapping dhotis, persistent brown faces, hands thrusting tawdry souvenirs into our vision, clawlike fingers clutching at our arms, glowing heaps of powder, red, yellow and bright orange, and flower petals for use in worship, throbbing drums, running footsteps, glimpses of carved screens inside the Golden Temple, and a wrought golden doorway, glimpses of old people lying motionless on ancient and sagging charpoys inside dingy hovels. It is an assault on our senses and our emotions. Anna is exhausted and frightened by it, and it reminds Dave and I of the only film we've ever been unable to sit through – Fellini's *Satyricon*. To us, a picture of Hell; to the Hindu, an opportunity to claim Heaven.



## AGRA



And so, to Agra – first sight of the Taj from the air, serenely positioned alongside a gentle curve in the river and much larger than we'd expected. I am seated by a Yogi, on his way to spread his particular gospel in the West. His description of reincarnation – “well, you see, it is as if you have been shopping, and you have not purchased all the items on your list. So you must return another time, or else you will not rest...” I munch peanuts and nod seriously. Am I missing something here, I wonder, being so unmoved by the possibilities of Hinduism? To be honest, except for Bali, my sojourn in Buddhist and Hindu lands have only served to increase my respect for some of the basic concepts of Christianity. Dave spent some time at a Buddhist monastery near Kathmandu, and was impressed by what he heard, and also by the range of books in



the library, but Buddhism is syncretic (I think that's the term) and its philosophy at the level explained by the western Buddhists he talked to, and the library, is a long way from the Buddhism practised by the vast mass of adherents. My impression is that Hinduism is the same only more so and has never had the benefit of applied thought or argument to raise it much beyond animism and the worship of Gods and ancestors, apart from the heavy hand of individuals like Manu, in the 3rd Century B.C. who straitjacketed Hindu society with a rigid code of laws which makes the Inquisition look like a T.V. quiz game by comparison.

There is no basis to many Hindu practises, beyond the say-so of certain individuals, not so much carved in stone for people to observe and read, but carved in stone on their hearts and minds.

Hindu women, for example, have been frozen in bondage ever since, until law reforms by the British during the last century.

Both Hinduism and Buddhism also to be rather self-centred religions. Personal salvation is the only goal, nothing else matters, and I prefer concepts of service and neighbourliness to leaven my spiritual bread. I think it was, however, not without some relief that I identified amongst my reactions to the magnificent Taj Mahal – seen later that evening, in the light of the full moon!! A deep appreciation of at least some of the spirit and intention of its creators. I am not then, totally out of tune with the Asian mind; I am merely rejecting some of its tawdrier manifestations. Perhaps it was too much to expect that I would gain greatly, in terms of understanding, from this sketchy and ill-prepared introduction to Eastern thinking. Anyway more reading must be done, I think, before I give it away altogether.

Agra was most pleasant – a brand-new hotel, with servants almost literally falling over themselves to wait on us. (This whole question of servility exercised our minds quite a bit – see later...).

We engaged the services of a young Indian, and his Uncle, rickshaw drivers to take us to the sights, as we didn't have time to spare walking etc, and they began by taking us to a neighbouring Hotel and waiting for a couple of hours while we disported ourselves in and around the pool, then transported us home for dinner, all for the princely sum of 10 rups! Later, nephew took us to see the Taj by moonlight, and it was absolutely wonderful. A poem in stone, so expressive of the husband's sadness and so perfectly beautiful and gentle – almost as if a cloud had been sculptured and harnessed to earth forever. We spent an enchanted hour or two there, and then nephew drove us home through the town, which is a pleasant, friendly sort of town, and feels very down-to-earth after Varanasi. It has rows of shops, and odd little squares where tongas are drawn up and the ponies hitched to rails under dusty trees. In the clear night air the scent of hay and horse-droppings was quite rich! Other narrow streets run between high whitewashed walls with glimpses of courtyards and rooms within. The area around the Taj is quite different – broad expanses of formal gardens and courtyards, bordered by extensive redstone walls, about 20-30 feet high, and magnificent high-arched porticos.

We returned the following morning with the kids, but the place was overrun with rubbernecking Indians, whose behaviour resembled a herd of teenagers on a school outing. For us the spell was broken, but at least Toby and Anna saw it, and may retain some images. We also visited the enormous Red Fort, with its fascinating mix of

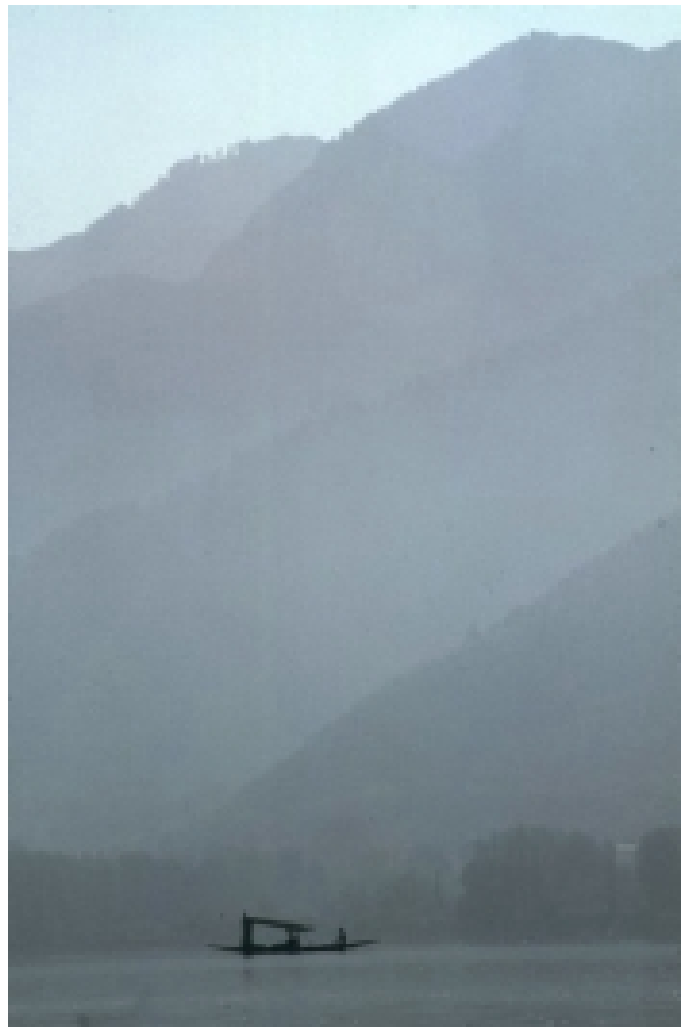
architectural styles, Hindu, Moslem, to suit the tastes of various wives, but the hassling of the kids began to get a bit much and they couldn't take any more. Once your chin has been chucked, your arm pulled, and your fair hair tweaked by the hundredth Indian, you really are ready to call it a day, especially when you're only five and just about to go down with another nasty fever!

We pipsqueaked out of Agra on a flight to Delhi that afternoon – we were on the “waiting-list” which can be notoriously unreliable. We passed over the railway bridge with the enormous and beautiful steam engine chuffing away below it even “poop-poop” us a farewell, sending Dave and I into nostalgic paroxysm for the sleek monsters of our youth.

When we arrived in Delhi we were able to confirm our flights to Kashmir, but during the night Anna's temperature shot up and we agonised whether to pull out and fly straight on to Greece, our next scheduled stop, in order to be on our way to England in case she didn't come right. We decided to risk it and go to Srinagar, where the weather would be cooler and we could let her rest, on antibiotics, until she improved.

An airport tout fixed us up with a houseboat and promised we'd be met at the airport. We were, and the houseboat, “Woodland”, turned out to be neat and clean and serviced by a charming Indian woman, Ashreita (Asha) and a friendly Kashmiri called Hassan. Asha had two children, a baby of about a year, and a boy of eight, which was great for Toby, since the boy (Yacob) spoke English. Anna was just sleeping all the time at this point and giving us considerable cause for concern. However, the temperature was pleasant and we decided to concentrate on getting her right. For a couple of days she didn't seem to respond to the antibiotics and we began to fantasise about dreaded and mysterious Asian lurgies, and seriously consider taking her to Asha's Doctor. However, little by little she improved, and we also came across another travelling family with an eight-year-old girl with whom she could play, which also bucked up morale.

We explored some of the delightful waterways around Dal Lake in a shikara. Unfortunately the Lake was prowled by crocodiles in the form of tradesmen, offering rugs, jewellery, paper maché etc. etc. And we had to spend at least some of our time fending them off. But generally



they lay in wait on the main lake, and we found our way into the tangle of little avenues behind the rows of highly ornamented houseboats, with names like “New Golden Palace” and “Queen Victoria” and “Las Vegas”. The locals stick poles into the shallow water and fill up the space between with waterweed and debris, gradually creating “land” on which they grow vegetables. Many of the poles take root and grow into trees with soft feathery leaves waving out across the water, so creating countless avenues and waterways to explore, some narrow and choked with weed, others broad, with quite a current. On the larger islands are huge farmhouses, built with bricks and stones added to a basic wooden frame. Many of these are three or four stories high. We see enormous pairs of pantaloons hung out to dry, looking like an ogre’s underpants. Apparently, all the men used to wear in the winter were these pants and a kind of voluminous poncho, made of wool woven into heavy cloth, with a coat-collar, and they carried little earthenware pots full of burning charcoal, set into a straw basket under these cloaks, to keep themselves warm. We saw many such pots on shikaras during our stay. In the summer, when the men discard their cloaks, you can see the scars on their bodies where they’ve spilt hot charcoal onto their skin. The women drape themselves in various bits of brightly coloured cloth. I think the basic outfit is a long tunic, split up the side, worn over baggy trousers, but being Moslem, they also have to keep their hair covered, so they add long scarves, and sometimes, extra shawls. They perch on the tips of light shikaras and paddle themselves around, looking like bright birds. Just about every sight here is worth a picture. Shimmering kingfishers dart around and dragonflies hover. The sky is a soft blue and the sun is warm.



We spend a morning buying rugs. It is difficult to choose, they are all so gorgeous. We spend another morning looking at paper maché and eventually buy some small boxes to use as presents for hospitality received in the U.K. We decide that we prefer good old N.Z. ceramics to have around the house. There is a “Christmas decoration” aspect to much of Indian decor and art which, while we admire the workmanship, or at any rate, the effort and skill involved, makes us turn up our noses at the thought of living with much of it.

The women are another aspect of it, particularly Hindu women, decked out in saris, with dangly earrings like upturned cups, with yet more dangle-dangles hanging from the rims of the “cups”. They are constantly twitching at various parts of their drapery, adjusting this, re-arranging that. Some women have extra bits of decoration either painted or tattooed onto their hands and feet so that they appear to be wearing lacy mitts and socks in a rather unsavoury brownish-black. Nose-rings are also common.



The virgins wear a modest slim circle through the side of one nostril; matrons display a heavier, and sometimes jewelled version through the centre. Saris are an important topic of conversation – the only remark Major Nat’s rather unimpressive wife managed to address to me, was to ask whether I wore one.

Watching a crowd of Indian women is like watching a cage full of budgies.

They twitter and flutter and peck and preen – if you half close your eyes to create an impressionistic blur, it is a most attractive whirl of colour and movement. I find the men more attractive, especially the Sikhs, who wear gorgeous cockscombs of turbans and sometimes roll their beautiful soft beards up into hairnets. We had to spend several hours at Delhi airport – of which more later, but I found that the time passed fairly agreeably because I could watch the human kaleidoscope passing before me.

Sad to say, the weather in Kashmir turned cruelly cold and snow appeared on all the mountains, including the low ones around the lake. We only had thin summer clothes and after shivering for a day or two, we decided to gamble on their being seats on the planes, activate our magic carpet air tickets, and migrate to warmer climes. So Dave and Toby went to investigate while Anna and I packed. They returned triumphant so we rushed off to the airport, just in time to see an enthusiastic welcome for some politician-advocate of Kashmir independence, who descended the steps to a hail of flower petals, and shouts from an entirely male crowd of supporters, almost all dressed in their ponchos and looking like a vast flock of sparrows hopping around a bird table.

We flew back to Delhi and were relieved to find the temperature reduced there also – from an expected 45° to a comfortable 21°! The plane we wanted, to Athens early the next morning, was full, but we were advised to turn up on the strong chance that some seats would not be claimed. So we bussed off into Delhi and went to the National Museum, which was disappointing – several parts were closed, others badly lit, and almost all displayed very badly. Toby mutinied and so we set off for the city, and jumped off the bus opposite a gay collection of roadside shops, crammed with brass pots, jewellery, clothes, novelties and so on. We spent an enjoyable



couple of hours bargaining for some nic-nacs, including a rather beautiful “lassi cup” in engraved bronze and some amazingly cheap clothes – about \$4 - \$5 for attractive blouses and skirts of my favourite kind.

After a good meal we went back to the airport and laid siege to the KLM desk. Hours passed, seemingly hundreds and hundreds of people checked in, and our morale sank. We became more and more fatigued and the kids discovered that staying up after midnight is not great shakes. Just as I was preparing to face another night at the Metro, Dave turned and stuck his thumbs up! We’d scraped on – four non-smokers next to each other in the business class. Next stop Athens. We hustled through the red tape and clambered exhaustingly onto the plane. It was 1.45 am. Goodbye India, farewell Asia – it’s been great and I want to come back. Your mysteries still fascinate, your complexities frustrate and your possibilities excite my imagination. But Europe pulls harder and harder. So goodbye to the Orient.

## GREECE

And hail to thee Greece, birthplace of Western man! We arrived to a calm clear morning in Athens and headed off to the Peloponnese, enjoying a bus ride through the rocky Greek countryside, fresh with the colours of late Spring – blood red poppies sprinkled liberally over deep green grass, bright yellow clumps of daisies, whitewashed cottages with a hundred shades of orange and brown in their painted roofs, turned earth of burnt umber, splashes of orange and yellow citrus amongst groves of dark-green bushes, grey-yellow olive trees with stumpy, gnarled like bewitched gnomes in Narnia.

I breathed in great lungfuls of ozone in the pale yellow morning and felt happiness surge through me at the prospect of unlimited time in Greece. We unloaded our baggage at Nauplion and Dave found us a room. Then went out to explore. A brisk wind was blowing but we found a sheltered walk under a headland bearing two enormous forts. Out in the misty blueness of the bay was an island on which was built a fort used by the Venetians to guard the Harbour, and in the distance we could see curve after curve of purple hillside flattened one against another in the light of the falling sun.

We picked great bunches of pretty spring flowers, pink, white, purple, soft yellow. Some were familiar English ones, others unfamiliar but reminiscent of the exotic orchid-like blooms growing wild in Bali. Then we returned to the town and found a restaurant in the delightful square. We devoured spaghetti (no Greek food available!!) and our first bottle of wine for almost three months, and rolled home, somewhat inebriated but gloriously happy, to collapse into deep and exhausted sleep at about 7.30 pm! (Our previous night having been in transit!).



The following few days were wet and windy so we explored some of the highways and byways of Nauplia, a town with a long and fascinating history. I read “Tales of the Greek Heroes” to the kids, who lapped them up, especially when they found that many of the stories had taken place in places we had already passed (Corinth, Nemea, Mycenae etc.) or were about to visit (Epidauros, Olympia, Athens). When the weather improved we headed for the beach to soak up the sun, first at Tolo, where Dave attempted – and succeeded – at windsurfing, and then at Vivari, where we spent nearly a week – it was glorious.

We lay on the beach in the daytime – the sun was beautiful, not “too much”, like in Bali, but strong enough to rev up our tans without burning. In the evenings we ate souvlaki or fresh seafood and Greek salad, sitting out by the water’s edge, watching the sky darken, the stars begin to glimmer, and the fishermen set off to sea in their pretty, sturdy little boats. We went for walks over rock-strewn hillsides, which really are fragrant with the scent of herbs and found crescents of beach entirely deserted and private. Graceful Eucalyptus and sombre Cypress trees stood alongside the roadsides and the scattered cottages were bright with fresh limewash and tubs of geraniums, roses and climbing plants. The one blot on the landscape – or rather, the several, were the local women, an uglier, heftier bunch I’ve never come across. Strange, because many of the men are well built and good-looking. They (the men) love to dance and we saw some that were really excellent and had worked out a number of “fancy routines”.

We enjoyed the music but did feel a bit overexposed to it by the end. Greece is really pushing tourism – almost every other shop is bedecked with more than its quota of blouses with Greek embroidery flopping in the breeze like china in a fair wind. Greek pottery, replicas of archaeological “finds” cram their shelves, competing for room with bronze or plastic copies of Greek statuary not a little of which is frankly obscene (even when you know about fauns, pan, etc).

But the real stuff is there too – we trip off to Epidauros and take an admiring look at the theatre and a brief look at the museum. For the first time I had a sense of the size of the buildings, from massive fragments of pediment and columns there, and the “groundplan” of the buildings themselves, covering several acres.



The following day, another glorious sunny day we hitched a lift with a couple of Israelis to a beach where Dave was able to hire a windsurfer, and Toby realised yet another desire to ride on one. He stood alongside Dave and went racing over the glassy surface. Anna also had her turn, sitting on the flat board in front of the mast. In the early evening we caught the bus back but it kept breaking down. Each time it died on us, the two middle aged and slightly paunchy Greeks in charge, resignedly climbed around it’s smelly black innards and probed the mysteries of the dark depths with an unusual degree of forbearance – the Greeks we’d come across usually reacted to events with the kind of behaviour which would earn them a quick trip to a straitjacket in Porirua if it happened in full view in Kiwiland.

When we eventually disembarked back at “Les Amis” it was pure pleasure to stagger to Yorg’s beachside taberna and sate our thirst and our hunger with calamari and beef, olives, fresh bread and retsina.

It’s getting difficult to find time to get everything in now – but remember the baby tortoise and the enormous caterpillar.



We decided to move to Olympia, regretfully bid Vivari farewell. A succession of buses shifted us slowly across the peninsula. One zigzagged us up to Tripoli, climbing crazily up a bony mountainside, swaying round corners with dizzy views down scree-covered slopes to a glittering sea in best “Italian Job” style. Another took us through gorgeous Arcadian

landscape, with a multitude of pastoral scenes on every side, for us to fill with nymphs and naiads, centaurs, satyrs and heroes. The road crawled along the flanks of countless hillsides and bowled along a series of orange and grey ridges, it swung around corners to reveal small towns clinging to their mountains. We would rattle into these towns and halt abruptly in the main square. People rose to greet the bus, people shouted comments and exchanged news. Old ladies in black, with vast posteriors, extricated themselves skilfully from their seats and climbed heavily out, muttering to themselves and squawking shrilly to their cronies like hens announcing the production of yet another egg.

At one point the bus detoured to yet another remote mountain village so we disembarked for a welcome supper of soft, fresh bread and local cheese and cold beer, before scrambling back on board as the surrounding hills darkened in a series of blue-greys against a dove-purple hazy sky. We descended towards Olympia, stopping once or twice outside gaily-lit tabernas, humming with life as local families ate their Sunday supper at ten p.m.

Surrounding gardens were thick with flowers and the countryside was heavy with summer, trees drooped leaf drenched boughs, paddocks and verges were luxuriant with deep grass and tall sprays of wildflowers. Sweet drifts of floribunda twinkled from the gloom of hedgerows. Huge trees, caught in the sweep of headlights appeared flat and full-



skirted with leaves and blossom. It was quite astonishing after the sparseness of the mountains.

We settled in Olympia, very touristy, but with some attractive street cafés, and the following days set off for the archaeological site, tracing out a path through the fallen walls and columns with the aid of maps and photographs. We found the Guest House, the Heraion, Nymphaion, Stadium, Treasuries, and Temple of Zeus. Dave and Toby ran around the track in the stadium while Anna and I applauded. We imagined how it must have looked – huge, graceful buildings, statues in profusion, the oiled bodies and rippling muscles of the young athletes, the soft white folds and flowing draperies of the women, the sweating, straining, magnificent teams of horses pulling chariots. Next day we went again, this time to the Museum, to be saddened by the pathetic sparseness of what remains, stunned by the power of what's left of the east and west pediments of the Temple of Zeus, and awed by the beauty of Praxiteles' sculpture of Hermes with Dionysus.

And so, on to Athens, with a night at Xilocastro, near Corinth, where Dave and I had a good meal in a fishermen's inn, down by the saltsmelling seafront, but the expected beach was a narrow, strong strip, so we moved on to Athens.

We found a hotel in the Plaka, a very old area on the slopes of the Acropolis. Our room looked out towards the famous hill, only a few dozen yards away. The area was stuffed with tourist shops and restaurants, but was intrinsically attractive with narrow streets and steps twisting and turning in secretive ways along the side of the hill, trees and small gardens softening the patchwork of roofs, walls, fences iron gateways. Not far away was a square, with trees and strips of grass, fringed with a bright border of tables and chairs under orange and blue awnings. It was pleasant to sit with a coffee or a beer and watch the World go by.



The centre of the square was the meeting place of a group of assorted drop-outs and alxies from various parts of Europe; several, I'm sad to say, were British. They would lurch in, like an untidy troop of stray dogs, to swagger and nose around their patch, occasionally sniffing out a passer-by to beg from but often collapsing in sodden, smelly heaps on the park benches. One night, a couple of Germans surprised one of the more unsavoury of the group, trying to sleep in a little park across the road from our hotel. The quiet night shuddered to his ugly shrieking and screaming, as he railed at them and abused them thoroughly. After an hour or so they must have got bored and



wandered on, but the few hours of peace were shattered, following his tirade, dogs howled, late taxis screeched, a car driven crazily fast through the tiny streets, crashed into some obstacle, and following a ghastly silence, was extricated with much grinding of metal and smashing of glass. I had very little sleep that night.

We went to the Poste Restante – welcome news from Becky and George. A snap bank strike had me queuing for over an hour to change money at the one place amongst the numerous banks in Syntagma Square still open. The contact with home must have made us a little too happy – we had lunch in a kerbside café and then fell into a hilarious game of dropping ice cubes down each other’s necks, punctuated abruptly by Anna bursting into tears.

We made our pilgrimage to the Parthenon along lanes rising up around the flanks of the hill. A sudden cloudburst sent us scurrying into a café set up above the Agora for an early lunch and Dave borrowed somebody's Daily Telegraph and caught up on news of the Falklands crisis. We were better prepared for our visit than the first time,



on our “Farewell to Europe” tour in 1973, and identified the various buildings but were disappointed that the Erechtheum was covered in scaffolding and cranes so that we couldn’t see the Caryatides. It was interesting watching them fixing poor, shattered pieces of column together, however, and we wondered to what extent it was intended to restore the temples, and who was paying for it. We debated the issue of “perfect proportions” but regardless of whether or not they “really” exist, the great bulk of the Parthenon is a satisfying eyeful, as far as I’m concerned. We walked all around, and identified the bit that was hit by a cannonball, and where King Aegeus must have thrown himself off, though how on earth he flung himself as far as the sea is a mystery to me! Toby found a toeclip of some nameless artisan’s boot and was thrilled to be told that it was probably from the sandal of some Roman or Greek warrior. He’d looked at some excavations going on during the laying of new chains in the Plaka, so he went looking for “finds” amongst the fallen stones.

The following day we went to the National Museum where they have a fascinating collection of stelae from burial grounds expressing resigned grief and restrained sadness throughout their composition, as well as on the faces and gestures of the figures. There’s also a marvellous Poseidon, poised to send a javelin hurling on its way. We also admired an Apollo, or it could be Perseus holding the Medusa’s head, and a boy on a galloping horse, leaping across the centuries.



We took the kids to a park, where they played at being Hercules and Athena, among other games, which involved charging around with twigs, which were “arrows”, “spears” etc. They seem to be enjoying the “art” more than we expected, so long as it’s in fairly small doses.

Our last night in Athens was a high spot. We put the kids to bed after a snack bar supper, which they loved, and then we went to a vegetarian restaurant with a pretty roof garden, and had dinner overlooking the narrow streets of the Plaka. After, I bought some Greek sandals, similar to the pair I bought when we were last here in 1973, which finally fell to bits after I’d worn and worn them. We also bought two beautiful tiny amphora – actually one isn’t – in a creamy clay, which will make good vases for dried flowers and grasses, from a garden gallery in a beautifully restored cycladian house.

Then we just wandered up and down the magical little streets, enjoying the feel of soft night air on our faces, and the scent of honeysuckle and roses. Every so often we would come across a taberna playing bazouki music and stop to enjoy the sound, so distinctive and yet with so many reminiscences of Eastern and Asian tunes, especially in the singing. It was as though the Asian and European parts of our trip fused at that point. We went up into one inn, climbing rickety spiral staircases from the 1900’s, to sit in the open air restaurant looking out over the rooftops of the Plaka to the hazy distant spread of Athens, a thousand twinkling lights stretching up to the low silhouette of the surrounding hills.

Immediately below us to one side, the intricate perspectives of the Plaka’s houses, alleys and squares, making countless choices for photographs – shape upon shape of soft yellow and golden surfaces, adjoining rippling pantiled rooves and walls in deeper shadowed tones of bronze to navy blue. The primrose and cream highlights were caught in the gentle light cast by old fashioned lamps fastened high on the walls – twentieth century neon was discarded in their favour a couple of years ago. Also illuminated by the soft light were sprays of leaves of Acacias, casting their own shadow into the stucco and stone behind them.

It was a Saturday night. Young and not-so-young Athens was out enjoying itself – eating too much, drinking too much, undoing top buttons surreptitiously, kicking off tight shoes under the table. Over by the little Greek band, dads and uncles got up to dance with fanciable females with cascading hair, while across the rooftops of the disco, teenage Athens bopped to the throb of heavy rock and the flash of multi-coloured strobes.

Waiters flitted like nervous parent-birds, attention seeking to lure your eyes, disappearing and reappearing like a shadow-movie.

Out above the light and life loomed the dark bulk of the Acropolis, blotting out the Moon and stars, still and silent after the illuminations are cut and the great curling blue and white flag of Greece hauled down the mast at Sunset. We walked home towards it, after a glorious evening, sad to be leaving the following day.

We found Greece to be one of the most visually exciting, as well as historically challenging places we visited. The colours are sublime, the light is fantastic, the lines and forms both simple and elegant. I’ve added the pictures on the following pages to whet my appetite on, until we have an opportunity to return....

## ITALY

We stumbled into Rome on a slumberous Saturday afternoon, the hot and stuffy bus disgorging us unceremoniously outside the main station. Dave and Toby trekked off into cavernous streets between great cliffs of stone buildings, leaving Anna and I to wait, guarding the luggage.

Shortly after, Dave returned triumphant and escorted us to a Pension a few streets away, where a lift in a wire cage bore us up to a tall airless room on the third floor. Upon opening the tall, shuttered windows, a roar of traffic met us and we decided that, airless or not, the windows must remain closed, to enable us to talk to one another, and create an area of peace and privacy in the midst of the huge European city below.

We were most unprepared for it. Reluctant to leave Greece, and attempting to give ourselves a burst of classical education in 3 weeks, we hadn't given much thought to Italy at all. Later that evening, after the kids were settled, we forayed into the strange streets, and I must admit to a sense of dismay, from the realisation of being in the midst of the High Renaissance without a paddle, so to speak, and grasping at straws of memories of past art history studies, to give me a handle on it. Rank upon rank of grime-laden neoclassical and Palladian tenements stretched in every direction, with a few signs of greenery and barely a glimpse of the sky. Hard streets, iron-bound windows, heavy wooden doors solidly shut against us, and a full complement of every architectural element and device in the book (whose names I had almost all forgotten) combined to make me feel very subdued.

The following morning was not much better. We set out to explore the shops, intending to get a sense of direction before embarking on any real sightseeing, but on Monday" all the shops are shut until 4 p.m. so we changed plans rapidly and caught a hideously hot and crowded bus to San Pietro, falling into Bernini's vast colonnade like apples into a box, along with a few thousand others, without any real awareness of what was about to happen.



Five million flock through Vatican City each year and a goodly proportion seemed to be there that morning. We quickly pulled ourselves together and bought a guidebook, and a quick perusal of the introduction brought once-familiar names and concepts swimming out of the murky depths of my memory once again – Bramante, Michelangelo, Maderno, Bernini...but once inside the vast maw of St Peter's, with the clicking of cameras and the highlighted tones of the tour guides echoing around it's cavernous interior I began to feel overwhelmed again – until the sight of so many halos in the paintings on the walls, and so many saintly expressions, and so much piety gave me an unexpected image of analogy – the feeling engendered by going down the



escalator in the London underground with eyes half-closed and the adverts of consumerism, like all these for Christianity – or the Roman variety, at any rate, moving past me like frames in a movie-film.

Michelangelo's Pietà, glowing softly and radiantly behind the protective glass sheath, was a real buzz, however, evoked my own memories of grief quite genuinely and spontaneously.

Then a rush for the Sistine Chapel – I thought it was just a little place and I could walk in off the street. How wrong can you be? No religious centre we've yet seen can hold a candle to the magnificence garnered up here. According to

Cavalcanti, the Borgia Pope, Alex VI lived by the premise that "All the wealth of Christendom belongs to the Papacy. And we shall have it!" And by the look of things, so did most of the others. My dash for the chapel was turned into a frustrating race-against-closing time, through a maze of galleries, staircases, monumental and mean, stanza, libereriae etc. All crammed with art treasure. I stopped for breath by the Laocoon and threw a passing glance at the Raphaels, quite phased by the profusion. Finally we reached the chapel, crowded and partly curtained off for restoration work, but the ceiling and Last Judgement, and most of the famous collection along the lengths were visible and I found a vantage point and began to drink it in!

We stayed until we had to leave, at closing time, and then trailed out, drained but delighted, for a pasta lunch. Later we found our way to the Borghese Gardens and attempted recovery, before plunging back into the streets around the Spanish Steps to window shop.

Rome is glorious! Some of it is over-splendid and some of it is spoiled, but time and again the eye, mind and heart are caught by some vista, of sculptures, graceful piazzas, stair-cases, landscaped gardens, impressive buildings, charming and even soothing, in an intellectual, rather than a pastoral, spirit. Perhaps not charming so much as seducing....



The following morning I had a few hours to window-shop by myself and I had a ball! The clothes, shoes and foodstuffs are all quite delicious – what brilliant use of colour and texture, taste, fur below a frill! Not to mention froth! There’s lace, silk, satin, velvet, flowered prints and glimpse of petticoat; bold geometries of shape against shape in gaudy hues like jester’s costumes; glazed fruit pies, fresh croissants to melt in your mouth, pink hams oozing melon juice, sharp little shoes in bronze and gold. What a feast!

That afternoon we joined a tour – the Piazza Venetia, and dozens of “sights” whirled by our windows...we clambered up steps, and quickstepped along alleys to the instruction of the guide, a dapper, almost elegant Roman who quite clearly considered



your average tourist party equated about equally to a group of nutters out for a visit from some institution. He lectured us severely on the moral fortitude of the Romans as we stood silently by an iron fence overlooking the Forum and then trotted us smartly away for our “go” at the Colosseum. He piled us back into the bus and whisked us briskly around St. Paul-Outside-The-Walls, and St. Peter-In-Chains. We saw Michelangelo’s magnificent Moses, with his somewhat disturbing horns, some where along the way, and were honestly relieved when it all finished and we could go and find ourselves a meal, after helping the kids throw coins in the Trevi Fountain.

Honestly, these tour-guides are a pain. Why don’t they just provide buses and walkmans with appropriate tapes, I cannot imagine! But I suppose it gives work to Fine Arts graduates.

On our third day we rose again – rather more promptly than on the previous two, and had another bash at the Vatican to complete our brief study of classical Greek art and have a good look at the Raphael stance. That’s how we’d decided to tackle Museums – to decide in advance what to go for, rather than wandering around getting waterlogged, befuddled and finally bored, by a plethora of visual stimuli.

It was a fine morning and we had an enjoyable time despite the herds of tourists. In the afternoon we took the kids to some swings and home on the Underground, which was an enormous thrill for them, and the following day we left for a few days at the seaside.

We’d been advised that a place called Orbitello was attractive. Well, it was, but we had quite a lot of trouble finding a place to stay, and the prices were so high as to have been ludicrous – except for the fact that we were going to have to pay for them! Eventually we found a room, and had a couple of days on a neighbouring beach, and an adventurous day climbing cliffs, watching bambolinas doing their thing in a pop concert, missing the last bus and hitching a lift home from Porte Ercole, which was in the midst of festivities. The kids also enjoyed the delights of candyfloss, roundabouts, and at least some of the fun of the fair! It was all very picturesque and enjoyable, and anyway we needed the rest after Rome.

## FLORENCE

On the following Sunday we moved on – Sunday seems to have become our main travel day, as things are fairly quiet, and reached my personal Mecca, Florence. We found a lovely room – huge, high-ceilinged, with tall French windows opening onto a balcony overlooking the courtyard, rather than the noisy street. And joy of joys for the kids – a little bed each!



The plumbing left a fair amount to be desired, and mosquitoes found a few marks at night, but we were as close to the sights as we could have wished, and not far from the station for an easy getaway.

As soon as we settled we went off to explore. The narrow streets of the old city were crammed with tourists but nevertheless, the place still felt very special. We found our way to the Duomo and riveted ourselves to Ghiberti's doors – what an achievement they were – before going into the Cathedral itself. Most of its treasures have been removed to a museum and later that week we visited it. It contained a beautiful pieta by Michelangelo – one done very late in his life, and the figure of Nicodemus, supporting Christ, is supposed to symbolise his own feelings at that time. The choirs by Luca della Robbia and Donatello are also there, and are just delightful, and there is a very moving statue of an aged and haggard Magdalene, also by Donatello.

We went to the Riccardi Palace on the way home, and saw the gorgeous Gozzoli Chapel, and then popped into the Church of San Lorenzo, its facade still unfinished, but very simply elegant.



The following day we went to see early frescoes by Giotto, and Masaccio, and were amazed by their vitality, and dramatic power, particularly the Masaccio – pity he died so young. Then a first visit to the Uffizi, for Botticelli, and blow and behold, the Primavera was away being restored, damn and blast. But Venus was still being blown ashore and his Virgin's honeycoloured hair still rippled in a "gentle breeze".

In the following days we slaked our thirst on feasts of fabulous art – another visit to the Uffizi, Bargello, San Marco and others, and still left so much untouched. We took the children to a local swimming pool and on the way back they got involved in some street theatre. A clown was keeping the crowd entertained in front of the Cathedral.

After the collection, to which Toby contributed, the clown picked him up, turned him arse over tit and shook him in case he had any more money hidden in his pockets.

Each evening we would feed the children and get them settled down, and then leave them safely tucked up in the hotel while we went out for a peaceful meal. We had some really good talks about all sorts of things. One evening we went to an art history lecture – but the lecturer turned out to be a hyperactive American phoney who'd just come back from chasing some women to Rome and was too exhausted to deliver his rave. But he invited us up to his rooftop flat for a glass of wine, where a conventionally pretty American girl and her friend, who had a mouth like a trap were trying to be so "laid back" and Eurocool, it was even faintly amusing. The third occupant, a pale young man who told us his penname was "Jonathan Zhivago" – from the period of pre-Revolutionary Russia, you know, an author who writes in a decadent aesthetic style, or an aesthetic decadent style, or something. We didn't stay long – but it was an experience!

We stayed almost a week and it wasn't nearly long enough. It would have been marvellous to wander for hours around the narrow streets and sunlit squares, peering into workshops and little galleries, and revisit some of the museums for a third or fourth look. While we were there we both finished Irving Stone's biography of Michelangelo, "The Agony and the Ecstasy" – what a title – which gave us a reasonable background in Florentine and Roman history, including some information on the Papacy at that time. They were not exactly spiritual men!

But it must have been a very exciting time to be alive, thinking, when Lorenzo the Magnificent and his mates were trying to set free the minds of men and start off the process of observation, deduction, hypothesis, experimentation, theory-building and the rest. Later on, when they got into Power and Glory, my interest wanes. It's all

heavy marble and grandiose decorations, and quite frankly, they can keep it. My thing is when you can see the bones of ideas sticking through the skin of the subject – an annunciation, or a crucifixion, which tingles with life, as artists experiment with perspective, applied mathematically or in terms of light and shade, and test the limits of Christian thought by blending in larger and larger quantities of pagan or classical philosophy to the mixing pot. Then there is the drama surrounding the genius of individual's – Filippo Lippi, Botticelli, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, even, and then the concept of the importance of works of art – the David, for example, to a city-society like Florence. The quality of restraint and austerity also strikes a chord in me. Somehow creating beauty from what is around, the sombre blue-grey *pietra serena*, and making vast harmonies from simple, almost stark contrasts – blue or tawny stone, white or cream surfaces – speaks to my capacity for “making the best of things” and understanding and responding to the demands of one's present psychological space, rather than tripping off in search of preciosities from every-which-where, and changing ideas and values according to the fashion, like Venice. Mind you, when you think that over the last four months we had done enough tripping to satisfy the most avid butterfly, perhaps I shouldn't sound too exclusive in my ideas.

## VENICE



At the end of our week we packed up again and headed for the station. We were looking forward to a glimpse of Tuscany on our way north to Venice, but the train ran through innumerable tunnels, several of which were very long indeed, and by the time they'd all finished we were running across the flat, uninteresting plains leading that strange piece of coastline where some enterprising, if slightly short-sighted entrepreneurs began to put together the recipe which finally produced the confectionery of Venice. I hadn't realised that it's actually balanced unsteadily on some small islands in the middle of a lagoon and was originally only reachable by sea – so that if the Venetian navy maintained its supremacy, the city was practically invincible.

Anyway, we arrived, prosaically, along a modern causeway, pulling into a large modern station and it could have been anywhere. But once outside, there was the Grand Canal, it's waters glittering in the sunshine, and along its banks, buildings like birthday cakes, pink and yellow and white, with fantastic decorations, lacework, pinnacles, like a Granny Straton concoction. We found a hotel – expensive but comfortable – bathroom, and pretty balcony overlooking a gorgeous little walled garden, behind which was a square in front of a church designed like a Roman temple, with a lovely set of columns – those are Corinthian, said Anna.



After we'd unpacked, we went exploring. It had been raining and the pavements and lanes were gleaming and steaming in the hot sun that followed. We found our way to the Rialto and sat alongside the Grand Canal, having a late lunch and watching the people and boats swarming along the waterway and its banks. Venice was packed with tourists and after our marathon in Florence, we felt content to sit and let them drift past, with our eyes half-closed against the brightness of sunlight on water, which created a Seurat-like "impression" of myriad flashing points of colour making up our immediate world.

Eventually we found our way to St Marks Square, with its gay arcades and the surprising upthrust of the watch-tower creating strange perspectives, and joined by a large party of small, rotund Italian peasants on some sort of weekend outing, for a boat-trip along the Grand Canal back to our hotel. There is a magic about such trips – I remembered similar journeys along the river which was through Bangkok, past splendour and squalor squashed together at random, and the bizarre fascination of our early-morning paddle alongside the ghats at Varanasi.



This one was rather moving (no pun intended) as we were retracing a journey we had taken almost ten years earlier, shortly before leaving Europe for New Zealand, and also because Canaletto's magnificent facades are fading, crumbling, and slipping into obscurity beneath layers of green slimy weed, and very murky water, and although massive reconstruction projects are underway on some of the palazzos, in an attempt to save them, it seemed fairly obvious to us that Venice 1982 is in a more seriously decayed state than it was in 1973.

But nevertheless it was lovely to see it all again, with the gaily dressed people and the extravagantly decorated buildings combined with the glittering water and the bobbing boats, and of course the gondolas, to make up the familiar – but still delightful, picture.

We disembarked at the end of the line and bought provisions, including Nutella for the children.

I hadn't even seen any for years so it was a great treat for me as well, spread on pieces of delicious fresh brown bread from a gorgeous bakery, stuffed with a remarkable range of breads, rolls, and bread-sticks, white, golden and brown.

After feeding and settling the children – sharing one bed again, to their chagrin, but we put one to sleep in my bed and so they dropped off very easily – Dave and I went out to find a meal. We wandered for ages; loathe to make a choice in case the next bend in the road revealed an even more appetizing eating-place. We finally settled for a restaurant in a large square, patronized by some fairly authentic looking locals, which is usually a good sign, and had a lovely Italian supper. I do enjoy the pasta, the sauces and wine.

Then we strolled home and slept well, and the following day prepared to make a movie by looking for interesting shots and debating about a theme. While doing so, we retraced our steps to St. Mark's Square, and since rain threatened, decided to go into the Basilica, although we hadn't intended to make any serious study of the art in Venice. It was an interesting venture, however, shot with sudden memories of features noted in Hindu and Moslem architecture, and also in Greece, softened – or made more acceptable and recognisable, perhaps, by the influence of Christianity.

Then we found a marvellous book display in the loggia of the Doge's Palace and spent an hour or so browsing. If our "library bag" hadn't been so crammed full and heavy, we would have been very tempted to purchase at least a dozen fascinating looking titles. There were also numbers of slim volumes of photographs or reproductions of prints or paintings, which we could happily have carted away.

It was still looking very gloomy so we decided to subject the kids to yet another museum, and have a look at the Doge's Palace. Although it contains many a gilded ceiling with panels decorated by Tintoretto, Canaletto, and other notables, which you have to crick your neck in order to see at all, the most interesting aspect for me was a stunning view of the roof of St Mark's, a mountinous moonscape of cupolas, from an upstairs window. Toby particularly enjoyed the collection of arms and our brief visit to the jailhouse across the Bridge of Sighs. Dave embarrassed them terribly on the way over the bridge by pretending to be a condemned man, and sobbing out a farewell to an imaginary girlfriend on a gondola below.



Then we marched home through the gloom, trying to acclimatise ourselves to the change in temperature, in preparation for the British summer to come!

On the Monday morning, all was fair again, and we took a boat out to Murano, to look at the glassworks. Toby and Anna were fascinated, especially when one of the men blew a little horse especially for them. I always love watching glassblowing. It seems like a ballet to me, with each man moving in time to the demands of his craft; the heat-and-air choreography of glass blowing. We watched until the little horse cooled down and then wrapped him up and carried him away. He seemed much more precious than all the intricately shaped and coloured glassware on display and was all set to become a family treasure.

When we settled down at the Paddocks we gave him pride of place on a bookshelf, but returned one day to find him smashed to smithereens, inexplicably, and scattered on the carpet. We can only suppose that he self-destructed due to internal pressure caused by his rapid heat-loss as we noticed that all other finished articles in the oven – a sort of warming drawer in reverse, (a cooling drawer if you see what I mean,) presumably so that they would lose heat very gradually and thus avoid exploding violently and unhappily.

We ate our bread and Gorgonzola sitting by a canal in the main “street” of the little town of Moreno, a very pleasant scene, and then wandered back to the quay past some marvellous displays of glassware, including some heavy modern stuff looking like petrified water. Amazing to think that a solid substance can express so liquid a form. Even though it is initially liquid, one supposes that in it’s solidifying it will somehow lose this quality, but such is its magic that it does not, and its good to see that much modern glass design seems intended to demonstrate this particular quality as part of



some abstract or representational form, rather than subjecting the glass to the demands of an imposed design, e.g. cut crystal.

When we returned to Venice, we set out to look for a gondola and eventually found one doing business that day. And what business – the guy literally cleaned out my purse once I’d opened it. Fortunately it contained just about what we were prepared to pay, so Dave kept his money hidden, otherwise we might have been left destitute!

We had a pleasant paddle around, but except for the experience I think I preferred the riverboats, provided you get a window seat. Gondolas are low and rather ungainly craft, once you get into narrower waterways, and are prone to get hooked onto other boats and require lengthy unravelling. It’s rather like driving a Rolls in a bazaar.

In the evening we ate outside again, this time in a lane opposite the massive walls of a church, and watched the people to-ing and fro-ing. Then we strolled on to the Grand Canal, via St Mark’s Square, where orchestras trilled, and found it festooned with gondolas full of hippies, four or five abreast, each with a singing gondolier, and one playing an accordion “O Sole Mio!” etc. Despite the abounding cliché’s, it was a cheerful and amusing scene, and a good note to end on. We took a riverboat back to our hotel, through darkened canals, sparkling here and there with lights, walked home with the sound of water lapping on the steps, and went to bed, to get some good sleep before moving on to Germany the following day.

## GERMANY

We had a super flight into Germany – toys and games for Toby and Anna, and a great view of the strange Venetian landscape, and then Northern Italy, with Roman roads clearly visible, even when only marks across fields, and then the Alps, until we came to the flat plains around Munich, rather a surprise – we had expected hills.

No message from Barbara at the airport, and no reply when we rang her number, so we got the airport hotel service to find us an hotel, and caught a bus in, leaving most of our luggage in a locker, since we had arranged to fly on to Stuttgart the following evening. Our room was comfortable, but more expensive than the luxury hotel in Varanasi, and only a pensione. We bought chicken for the kids and after settling them, went out on the town.

Munich turned out to be a neat city of broad streets and moderately tall buildings, well laid out and scrupulously clean. Very much a contrast with the more-or-less haphazard arrangements of the cities we'd left behind us. We walked into the centre and joined a polite throng of extremely well dressed German citizens – burghers, is the term, isn't it. Respectable burghers. But behind a builder's hut at the edge of a park we found something else – a group of alcoholics, male and female, grouped in a hopeless huddle with the smell of stale beer rank in the air.

We found the city centre, dominated by a huge Gothic cathedral with a fantastic clock on its spire. One of those that has lots of large carved and painted clockwork figures that revolve, and eat soup, and lift off their hats and bow when the clock strikes. We sat in a restaurant opposite and had a marvellous meal – thick, crisp, beautifully cooked Viener Schnitzel, of course.

Then we walked home through the broad shopping malls where terribly young folksingers were busking, doing the songs of our era – Beatles, of course, but also Baez, and, amazingly, “Where Have All The Flowers Gone?” Could it be that we will find ourselves carried nostalgically on the bow of a “new wave” of the music of the concerned youth, I wonder, as the Peace movement, and the Green movement sweep across Europe? Maybe/Maybe not.

The next day was cold and wet, and we, of course, had left our cagoules at the airport. But we set out, nevertheless, after a real “continental breakfast” for a museum housing a number of classical masterpieces, including the pediments of a Greek temple.

We spent the rest of the day at two excellent science museums laid out with admirable forethought and attention to detail. We travelled by a prompt and efficient network of trams, but got thoroughly chilled waiting at tram stops in the rain, finally, however, it was time to go out to the airport and board the plane for our penultimate flight. We were handed little polythene bags in the departure lounge, containing a snack meal – very welcome and what a good idea for short flights.



We flew in low over Stuttgart and it's environs – low hills, thickly wooded slopes, rich pastures, neat towns, and landed smoothly. We came out into the arrivals lounge looking anxiously for Thomas and Klaus – and there they were, looking large and handsome, and very pleased to see us. It was delightful.

They piled us into their cars – they'd brought both, to accommodate our luggage, and conveyed us smoothly into town, to Klaus flat. After we'd put Toby and Anna to bed, we talked for hours and ate strawberries, After Eights, and drank gorgeous German white wine. Thomas left, finally, as he had to be up early next morning, to leave for a group on the Dutch border.

We had breakfast in the garden next morning. Cereal, fruit-juice, coffee, rolls, ham, cheese, honey, jam, fruit..... Then we went for a walk through a nearby forest. Tall trees soared above us, grasses and wildflowers swayed in the gentle breeze, the sky was blue and birds sang. Klaus told us about the acid rain that falls on these magnificent trees and may be destroying them, but somehow it didn't seem to matter, it was my first reunion with glorious European woodland, and the kids and I sang every song we could think of, and arrived back breathless and very happy. In the afternoon we went to a marvellous swimming pool, the size of a football pitch, with a very sophisticated toddlers' pool, and a juniors' pool with a sloping bottom, which the little ones could run in and out of happily and confidently. It occupied ours for hours.

The following day Klaus took us to Tübingen, his old University town, which is a charming place, its buildings being systematically preserved, and its squares full of young people selling Greenpeace literature and badges, pushing gay liberation, having picnic lunches and generally making a very pleasant scene. We wandered around and then went to visit his brother, an ardent traveller, who was preparing for a trip to Indonesia.



On our last day we visited the castle at Lichtenstein, perched like an eagle high on its rocky pinnacle, gazing down on the valley below, with neat rows of dolls houses set precisely side by side like a Lego village in a toyshop. After our tour and conducted by a German speaking guide who looked like a magnified version of one of Snow White's dwarfs we went for a walk through countryside that could have come straight from Berkshire. We collected huge bunches of wildflowers to take to Thomas' girlfriend, Ulla, who was entertaining us to a fondue supper.

Our last morning was a whirl of baths, washing-behind-the-ears, pressing clothes, trimming hair and, of course, the inevitable packing – but, for the very last time!

Finally we were ready, and went into the garden for honorary photographs of the whole family, completely laden, in the manner to which we had become accustomed. Then we set out for the airport, with excitement mounting minute by minute. We boarded our last plane, buckled seatbelts for the last time, ate our last airline meal – and began to peer down at the seemingly never-ending landmass of Europe, waiting for the first sight of the channel.

At last we saw unmistakable blue water far below, streaked with the occasional white wake. It was surprisingly empty and tantalisingly broad – seemed like hours before we made our first sighting of the country we'd waited such a long time to see. By this time, excitement was at fever-pitch. Thank heaven Lufthansa board passengers with children at the front so we would be first off.

A marvellous flight over London – Tower Bridge, the Houses of Parliament, Buckingham Palace – and our own house too, somewhere below. Then the landing, and miles of taxiing until we finally came to rest. We shot off, through Immigration – to a frustrating and lengthy hold up waiting for our luggage. But at last it came and we were free to go out into the hall, to find our welcome party – Pete and Grandfather Tom, Pete standing a head above the crowd, waving madly. Toby raced off to greet him with a “Mornin’ Cobber”, we negotiated the last of the crowds and had a glorious reunion. Back at last!

Then we raced off to find the Rolls, Dave and Tom already deep in talk, me feeling quite dwarfed by Pete, and the kids skipping along and grinning as if they can't quite believe we've made it.



Into the Rolls, smoothly out and away. London hackney cabs, big red buses. AA signs, Pubs, rows of ubiquitous semis. Hedgerows, copses. Rolling countryside.

We've made it. We're home, safely and happily home. At journey's end, with Paddocks and all its comforts awaiting us, family, tea on the lawn, strawberries, Betty's cake, cousins, presents, new clothes, luggage from New Zealand and a whole new lifestyle to open up and exclaim over.

Travelling's finished, put the packs away – until the next time- and then we'll go to.....