

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BEB-21a
Homeward Bound

Kampung Pasir
Tampoi, Malaysia
15 November 1983

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire, USA

Dear Peter,

The Nepal winter is close at hand. The monsoon barely over, snow now falls on the high passes and peaks - Annapurna, Daulagiri, Thorong La. Many are closed now, ending the trekking season for all but the best-equipped. Further south, nearer sea level, India too is seeing the last vestiges of autumn. The morning air is crisp on the Gangetic plain, though still polluted with smoke of dung fires and factories. The Taj Mahal is swathed in industrial mist and, only a few miles distant, is invisible, cloaked. Guides, taxi drivers and tourists alike cough on these cold, polluted mornings; they wear shawls and sweaters for warmth.

But here, on the equator, ceaseless, unchanging, the weather remains steamy, the wet season slightly wetter and cooler than the dry season, itself slightly hotter and dryer than the wet. It is the November monsoon, the northeast monsoon, and flooding has begun. Yesterday, the Kelang River overflowed its banks, washing over the roads, inundating homes. My taxi stalled a few miles from Tamin Permata; I walked home, knee deep in swirling yellow water, the residue of nearby construction sites -- earth, wood, refuse -- washing past me, out to sea. Today I'm visiting Kampung Pasir, bidding goodbye to my Malay family -- hosts over a decade ago to my American Friends Service experience. Tomorrow I go to Singapore and fly home.

I had hoped to have a newsletter draft ready by the time I reached Kuala Lumpur, planning to hammer out BEB-22 during the hiatus between Nepal and my homeward journey. No typewriter was available [Note to ICWA newsletter readers: this is being retyped in Hanover -- PBM], alas (my own was sent back by sea) nor could the essential photos be processed in time. Long before I left Nepal, my trekking partner Stephen Starbuck had offered to take my film to KL; had he succeeded, the slides would have been ready upon my arrival. Steve, however, was caught in the Kathmandu standby crush, along with the members of the Japanese Daulagiri expedition, the American Everest expedition, the Yugoslavian Maccapuchare expedition.

Bryn Barnard is an Institute Fellow studying visual communication in Southeast Asia. He wrote this letter to the Hanover staff, but we thought you might be interested in seeing it.

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Most were better placed than Steve to bribe Thai airlines officials in Kathmandu for a spot on the passenger manifest. One by one they squeezed onto the "fully-booked" flights to Bangkok, thence home. Other special cases also got boarding passes: the American woman who broke her hip when her Thai International flight hit an air pocket, sending her and the just-served dinner trays into the ceiling, then onto the floor; the British man who fell off the trail between Jamsom and Kalopani, breaking his leg and his bank account (the emergency helicopter ride to Kathmandu runs \$2,000 or so); the Italian woman who knew the Nepali royal family. All got on one flight or another. Steve waits still.

Hence, my pitiful and pitiable explanation aside, I must wait until arrival in Laguna Beach to finish BEB-22, my newsletter on the billboard traditions of Thailand and Indonesia. BEB-23 and BEB-24 are also begun, but similarly, must await the USA for completion. I will get the laggards to Hanover as soon as possible.

My Nepal excursion provided just the data I had hoped for: Tourist impact on the newly-opened east side of the Thorong La Pass (17,500 feet) was far less than on the heavily-touristed west. A good thing, too. The east is arid, physically continuous with the high desert of the Tibetan Plateau. Wood and fuel are scarce; already huge tracts of land are denuded of forest, ravaged by over-farming, scarred by rain and wind. This is the Manang region, one of the least populated in Nepal. Tourists bring cash, but also strain the area's limited resources. Without careful planning, the east side of the pass may soon be incapable of supporting either tourists or locals; the Manang moonscape may be abandoned like the infertile regions of western Tibet.

The western side of the Thorong La, conversely, has little trouble supporting a swelling tourist population. Lower than the Manang side, the western side of the Thorong La is also blessed with plentiful rain. Here, the Kali Ghandaki gorge cuts between the massifs of Annapurna and Dhaulagiri. The hillsides are terraced and support maize, millet, potatoes, fruit orchards, cattle herds. The trails are choked with mule trains, pilgrims, porters and tourists: American, European, Japanese, Australian, Indian and Nepali. Signs in both English and Nepali are abundant, advertising hotels, rug factories and restaurants. (On the Manang side, advertising signage is almost exclusively in English; Indian and Nepali tourists are rare.)

Tourist traffic appeared much heavier than during my first visit in 1978. Villages have grown, trekking lodges are more abundant,

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western-style "trekking food" is ubiquitous.

The biggest change, however, is not in the amount of tourists, but the type. During my 1978 trip, the trails were full of "freaks" -- ravaged dregs of cross-Asia caravans, self-styled sadhu holy men, remnants of the hippie movement, junkies, panhandlers, the "Great Unwashed" of the 1970s' drifter tourism. Most were in Nepal for the plentiful hashish; trekking, usually from Pokhara to the hot springs at Tatopani, was but a sidelight.

Today, up-market tourists are the rule; freaks are the exception. Only in Kathmandu does a sizeable "alternative community" survive; even here the "Freak Street" hash dens and pie shops are only half-filled. Instead, Thamel, the trekking-supply shop distributor of Kathmandu, has become the new tourist focus. Streets are choked with stores selling parkas, sleeping bags, crampons, Tibetan rugs, jewelry; restaurants, more expensive than those on Freak Street, offer "potassium permanganate-soaked lettuce salads," quiche, steak and pop music. The clientele, while not wealthy, is at least healthy. Well-scrubbed college kids abound. Most wear down vests, boots, Levis; a few wear "freak" attire: gaily-colored shirts, cotton trousers, embroidered vests, headbands and sandals. Unlike real freaks, however, these newcomers appear to wash their uniforms frequently; some even have knife-edge creases.

I'll discuss freaks, tourists and tourist art more thoroughly in BEB-24.

My flight to Delhi from Kathmandu, alas, was delayed; my time was so short that I had to cancel my trip to the National Institute of Design. My few days in the Indian capital were spent researching billboards, signage and advertising. Apparently international copyright laws have little power in India; I saw many well-known American trademarks with surprising new uses. The McDonalds golden arches had found their way onto the Metro Hotel; the Chrysler pentastar had been transformed into the Punjab State Milk Board logo; Amtrak's double-arrow symbol bedecked most Delhi Transport Authority buses and, of course, Campa Cola sells in bottles that in shape and script are dead ringers for Coke. Similar practices prevail in Indonesia.

I will write again when I reach California. Please let me know when/if the color-sample sheets arrive. They were sea-mailed to Hanover well over a month ago. [They arrived December 13 -- PBM.] I was pleasantly surprised to receive Jack Thompson's proposal for a temporary Universities Field Staff International post. Lectures and writing for the Field Staff would be an exciting and

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worthwhile project.

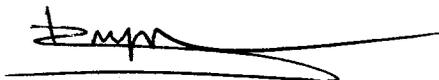
Matari Advertising wants me to consult for 3-6 months, beginning in April. The work would include some teaching and 12 illustrations for a Bir Bintang (Star Beer) calendar. I have accepted conditionally: the consultancy won't begin until after I've completed my Institute obligations, including the Salisbury show in the spring, should that become a reality.

I have about 30 pieces picked out for the show: 22 sketches and 8 paintings. I'll send slides from the States. The sketches were chosen to represent both the media I've used (charcoal, ink, paint, pencil), the subject matter covered (homes, people, machinery, landscape), and the illustration styles employed (didactic, editorial, non-objective). I'm carrying virtually all home in my suitcase, save a few of the oversized paintings that had to be sent sea-mail.

When is the Spring meeting [May 18-20, 1984 -- PBM] and, show or not, am I expected to attend? [Yes -- PBM]

Happy Thanksgiving.

Cheers,



Bryn Barnard

P.S. Enclosed is information on Singapore's Maghain Aboth Synagogue, requested some months ago by a newsletter reader. Please send it on if his address is available. [It isn't. Will the reader who sent the request to Bryn please write to us? -- PBM]