

TRAVEL & ADVENTURE

About the TRAVELLER



□ William Pearce.

What do you do when you're not travelling?
I'm living in the Bay Of Islands, fishing and sailing and indulging my passion for photography. I work as a film camera assistant on commercials and movies.

What's the best place you've visited?
New Zealand, because of the unique fusion of Maori and European cultures, and of course the climate and scenery.

Tell us about your worst travel disaster...
Catching typhoid in India and holing up in a dingy hotel room trying to make the pain go away, then literally crawling to the nearest hospital for a diagnosis.

What sparked your interest in travel?
A desire to see more and more, also my dad had done a wee bit so the house was full of all these exotic things.

What's your number-one travel hint?
Abandon all preconceptions and then you will always be surprised.

What's the one place in New Zealand/Northland visitors shouldn't miss?
Abel Tasman National Park. In Northland, driving the "million dollar road" from Matauri Bay north, with stunning views over to the Cavalli Islands and the Bay of Islands on a clear sunny day.

In the 1990s a young Scot went on a journey fuelled by drugs, naivety and a determination to experience the Indian subcontinent to the fullest. The then 18-year-old cast himself as a latter-day Kerouac in an "Ultimate Shamble" on the road to Kathmandu, ingesting every mind-altering substance in his path. Now based in Paihia, William Pearce reflects on a life-changing journey.



□ OVERLOADED: Street scene in Kathmandu, Nepal.

— PICTURE / William Pearce

Holy cow! Naivety and confusion across a sub-continent



□ HOLY COWL Varanasi Railway Station, India. — PICTURE / William Pearce



□ The abandoned city of Fatehpur Sikhari, near Agra, India. — PICTURE / William Pearce

IN OCTOBER 1992 I found myself in Kathmandu. I don't mean that I fell asleep one night and mysteriously awoke in the Nepalese capital the following morning, unaware as to how I had got there. On the contrary, I was all too aware of how I had got there: A gruelling 14-hour flight with Pakistan International Airways, preceded by an equally gruelling 10-hour coach ride from Edinburgh to London in the deepest throes of an acid and speed come-down. Oh yes, I knew how I'd got there all right. What I mean is that whether by accident or design, out of a sense of duty or desire, I had been riding on the crest of a wave whose destination was inevitable but unspoken until it crashed, throwing me head-on into a culture I knew nothing about. I was 18, I didn't really know why I was there, I knew absolutely nothing about the place and even less about the people and their customs. I suppose part of me felt it was expected for me to do this — I was given the money, my brother had been there two years previously and my father had lived and worked there for a couple of years in the 60s. So we were instilled with a sense of duty to visit this fabled land for ourselves.

Whatever the circumstances, I'd planned a 10-month trip, which was to start in Nepal, go briefly through India and on to Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and then New Zealand, before heading back to Glasgow University and Electronic Engineering via the frozen expanse of Tibet. Little did I know that even the best-laid plans can evolve into something completely different. That first week in Kathmandu was the start of a very steep learning curve. Between episodes of self-doubt, homesickness and letter writing — not to mention hours spent on the toilet while my insides erupted — I slowly managed to adapt and actually learn a bit about my new surroundings. I slowly came to realise that I was in a very good position — okay, I had to squat on the toilet, I couldn't drink the water and I was on my own — but I had £2000 in my account, a Visa card and my freedom. I could do anything or go anywhere I wanted. The world was my proverbial oyster, which is an intensely liberating and in some ways dangerous thought for an 18-year-old.

I decided to set about having a ball, trying things that I shouldn't have, and doing the tourist things in my own messed-up, pseudo-beatnik fashion. To others I may have looked like an 18-year-old wannabe hippie on a gap year but in my eyes I was living the life. I even adopted a mantra of my own to fit in with the whole eastern thing, and it went like this: "Neither accept nor deny, merely observe and go with the flow." Quite what it meant I'm not sure, but I think I got it from the Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, a must-have travellers book I was reading at the

time. I tried to write letters home in a mock Kerouac/Burroughs-esque fashion and coined the term "The Ultimate Shamble" for my trip. It was my first time away from home and I was going to make the most of it. Amid stints of teaching Tibetan children, trekking and finding my feet, I spent my time searching for Shamen in the hills, hanging around bars in Thamel and eating mushrooms by lakes. I saw my first pyre cremation in Kathmandu by the banks of the Bagmati River and smelt for the first time the acrid smell of burning flesh mixed with incense. I wondered at the vast bronze Buddhas in the stupas and spent forever staring into the psychedelic Buddhist wall paintings — and I wondered just how far into your soul the all-seeing eyes could see, and why there were 13 steps to Nirvana. I was amazed at the idea of a little girl being revered as a goddess and locked in a tiny wooden temple. I was even more amazed at the prevailing Americana among the young men, the Springsteen-esque bandanas, the cowboy boots, white T-shirts and the Coca-Cola. I was beaten up in Kathmandu and locked out of my guesthouse, forced to sleep on the steps outside the pub with the stray dogs. I quickly learnt that pride and ego are two of the first things you have to lose to survive in Asia, so physical bruising was all I suffered on that occasion.

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□ Prayer flags, Tibetan plateau. — PICTURE / William Pearce

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TRAVEL & ADVENTURE



BOLIVIA



□ The Bolivian flag.

Local country name: Republica de Bolivia

Location: Central South America, surrounded by Peru, Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina and Chile.

Area: 1,100,000sq km (four times bigger than NZ)

Population: 8,900,000

Capital: La Paz

Form of government: republic

Independence: 1825 from Spain

GDP/capita: \$4200 (NZ's GDP/capita: \$33,000)

Life expectancy: 65 years (For NZers: 79 years)

Religion: Roman Catholic (95%)

Official languages: Spanish, Quechua and Aymara

National food: saltena (a pastie filled with meat and vegetables) or surubi (catfish), washed down with coca leaf tea

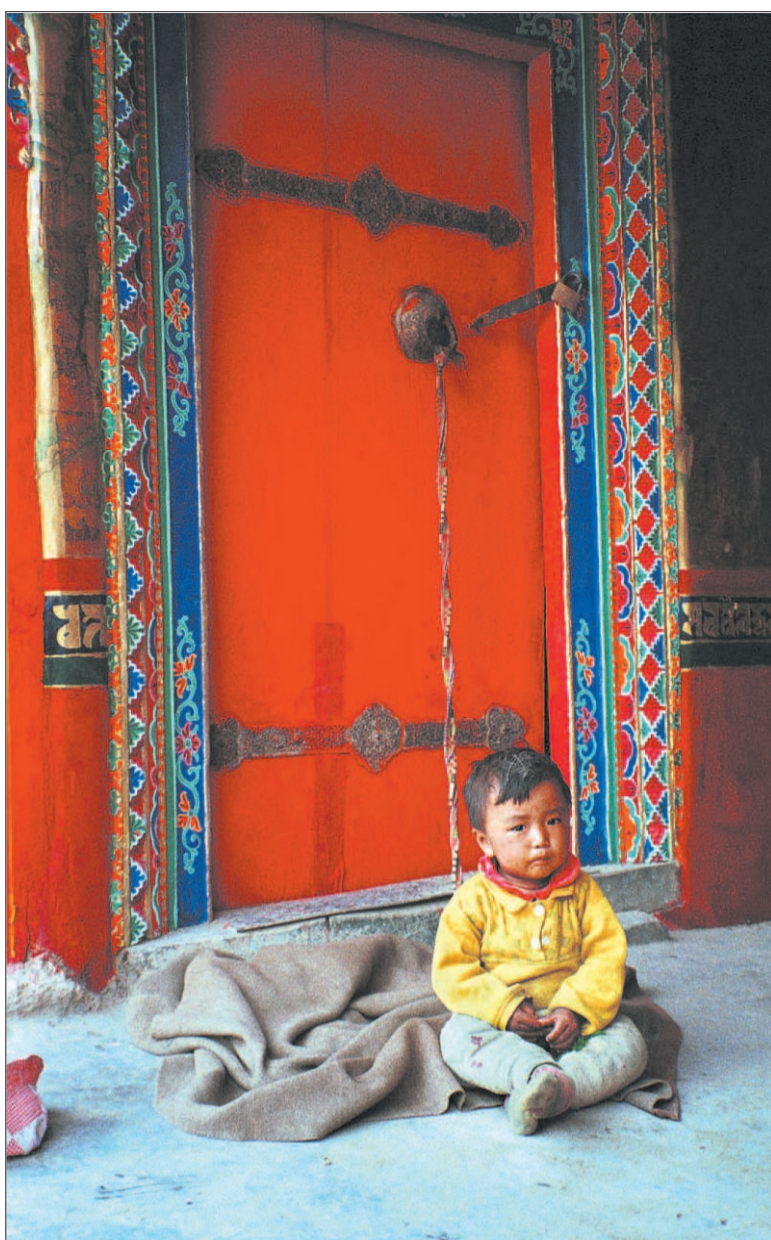
Greeting: buenas dias sopita ('good day')



□ Performers in a native dance festival, La Paz.

SURPRISING FACTS:

- Bolivia is named after national hero Simon Bolivar (1783-1830), who led the fight for independence in Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Panama and Bolivia.
- Since breaking away from Spanish rule in 1825, chronically unstable Bolivia has been through nearly 200 coups and counter-coups. More or less democratic rule was established in 1982, but the country remains plagued by poverty, social unrest and drug production.
- At 3600 metres, La Paz is the world's highest capital — almost as high as Mt Cook.
- Most of the wealth of the Spanish Empire came from Bolivia's silver mines. The mining centre of Potosi was for many years the biggest city in the Western Hemisphere.
- However, these days Bolivia is the poorest country in South America — almost two-thirds of its people, many of whom are subsistence farmers, live in poverty.
- Since independence Bolivia has lost over half its territory to neighbouring countries due to wars. Now landlocked, it had a coastline until the War of the Pacific (1879-83) with Chile.
- Bolivia is one of only three countries in Latin America where most people are descended from the original American Indians (the other two are Guatemala and Peru).
- Bolivia's new president Juan Evo Morales Ayma, voted in last year, is South America's first indigenous (American Indian) leader.



□ Jokhang Temple, Tibet.

— PICTURE / William Pearce

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THE fact is I have no idea how I managed to pass three months in Nepal. I suppose I did relatively little but acclimatise myself and meet people who had come from India, listening to their stories and formulating some idea of what I was going to do for the next 10 months.

I began to think about heading south and seeing for myself what it was all about.

So I set off for an India in mid-military curfew, immediately after the Ayodiah temple crisis. It was silly maybe, but I wasn't going to miss the Christmas festivities in Goa, no matter what the embassy said.

So I set off from the relative safety of the mountains to take in the enormity of the subcontinent before me, starting with the acid-fuelled Goan Christmas and then onto the desert of Rajasthan.

On I went from the camels and palaces of the maharajas to the monasteries of the Dalai Lama, absorbing everything and experimenting as I went.

I was falling for the lifestyle in a big way — not to mention the colours, smells and surreal dalliances that make up India. From the ghats of Varanasi where the crazy swim in the Ganges and where hash is legal; from gate-crashing a wedding in Jaipur only to become the object of quite ridiculous homosexual advances; to the Tollygunj Golf and Country Club in Calcutta where cucumber sandwiches are nibbled and washed down with the finest Earl Grey. From the toy trains and Gurkha rebellions in the tea plantations of Darjeeling, where the finest Easter bunnies in India are found; to the vast dope fields and illegal parties of the Kullu Valley, where the police get rocks thrown at them and people fall down cliffs hopelessly high.

I was loving the lifestyle on the sub-continent and decided to stay, to forget about Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and New Zealand. I had already forgotten about Glasgow Uni and electronics — I mean who wants to think about capacitance and silicon wafers when all around you is a myriad of sensory delights?

Everywhere I went in India I found something that fascinated and amused me, and I made a huge effort to make the most of every delight I came across.

What I didn't realise then was that making the most of it came at a high



□ Tibetan nomad. — PICTURE / William Pearce

price. Being exposed to such physical, spiritual and personal freedom at such a young age can be dangerous, and in my case left more than a few scars.

For me it involved being ill for eight months, regular psychotic episodes, violence, being shot at and tear-gassed, seeing friends carried away by the British Embassy with their bodies and minds in rags, paranoia, depression and spiritual confusion.

But I'm glad I did it, even when I think back to the weeks in Manali when I literally couldn't understand the English language. My brain deconstructed the words I had known for so long, so they became nothing but random sounds in

my head. Only through deep concentration could I salvage any meaning at all.

But I pressed on, relishing my freedom and accepting everything as normal, par for the course, symptomatic of the area I was in. There were no barriers to stop me, no parents, no work, no school, nothing to straighten out for. There was no one to tell me I was going too far, to remind me what I was like back home until it was too late.

What I had to do was to construct my own barriers, my own dam if you like, to keep myself from going too far and keep myself sane.

Had I stuck to my original plan and left India for Bangkok mid-way through my travels then things could have been very different.

I would've travelled through Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia — where many of the attractions India held for me are not available — and on to New Zealand, where I would have had a quick fix of civilisation before heading for the plateau of Tibet and then home.

But I didn't. I'd fallen for the sub-continent in a big way and decided to see more of it and then attempt for Tibet. I wanted more of the atmosphere, more of the lifestyle and more of the incense.

After six months of delights and an abortive trip to Pakistan, where a moment of clarity was had amongst the noise, confusion and the psychedelic buses, I set off for Tibet through Nepal.

Tibet had always been my ultimate goal, my Holy Grail, and it was one place I was not going to forget about, whatever my mental state. I set off from Kathmandu, where the communists were rioting and the tear gas and bullets were flying, stowing away with an American Everest expedition to cross the border

into Tibet.

The Ultimate Shamble was reaching its closing stages. Up through the humid foothills of Nepal to the barren plateau of Tibet, where you can see the snow-capped peaks in the distance. A lone, vast prayer flagpole marks the point where it finally levels out.

From Milerepas Caves, where the vast fertile valley stretches out below you, to Lao-Tingri, where I rode bareback on the plains waving a pink hat in the air and screaming like a deranged cowboy, dwarfed by the strange hump of Everest.

From the fort at Gyantze, where every night the traffic in the cosmos can be seen clearly chugging across the dark sky and the sheer number of stars is enough to blow your mind, to Shigatse, where the monks debate for hours on end in the shade of the trees.

And finally to Lhasa, where the Jokhang Temple is rebuilt among the destruction of countless other buildings, and the Rainbow Tribe brainwashed my companions.

In Lhasa cameras watched my every move, Chinese police patrolled the streets and people were afraid to talk truthfully. Everywhere I went in Tibet the effect of Chinese occupation was obvious, from demolished monasteries and vast sprawling prisons at one extreme, to Chinese-sanctioned rebuilding and investing in theme-park Tibet on the other.

From Lhasa I went to Tsurpcho, where I was blessed by the 17th Karmapa, third in line from the Dalai Lama; and to the Monkey Cave at Tsangpo where all life began and Buddha literally watches over us.

My final journey was back to Scotland, via Kathmandu and Calcutta. I had mixed emotions about it. I was

sorry to be leaving, but I knew I couldn't have stayed much longer and remained sane.

I was wary of returning home and seeing everyone again, but at the same time I was looking forward to it as if it were just another part of my trip. I wasn't thinking about university and what would be expected of me at all.

When I returned it quickly became apparent — not just to me, but to anyone who saw me — that things weren't quite the same. I couldn't relate to my immediate friends and family and they couldn't relate to me.

The barriers I had built for myself had been constructed too late. Don't misunderstand me, I was by no means mad. Just a wee bit strange.

I went to Glasgow Uni for one day and, as far as both sides were concerned, that was enough. The strangeness continued until the pain was unbearable and led me to seek relief. What followed was the rest of my life.

Looking back, more than 10 years after my arrival in Kathmandu, I can afford to be objective. The naivety with which I went is laughable now, the expectations ridiculous, the confusion understandable but with hindsight unfounded.

As for the spiritual confusion — well, what can you expect? I was 18 and incredibly impressionable. Even the mental torture I felt upon my return to Scotland could be considered something that made me who I am today. If I had stuck to my original plan, I probably wouldn't be here in the Bay of Islands writing this.

Where I would be instead, I can't say. What I do know is that I am very happy where I am right now, so I can safely say I don't regret a moment. I guess in a way I'm still having the ball I promised myself all those years ago in Kathmandu.

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