

Traveling with Frank and Katrina

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CHAPTER ONE

Traveling on the Edge

Katmandu, Nepal: The unrest of the story

Upon arrival in Katmandu, Nepal, Katrina and I learned from our tour guide that the American Information Agency was bombed the day before, causing the peace corps representatives to be evacuated, along with the families of all U.S. Embassy staff.

Maoist terrorists abducted 700 students and boycotted the city, closing down a dozen industries with a strike, killings and riots. The king dissolved the government, declared a state of emergency and imposed a curfew. The royal massacre of the former king and his family started the unrest in 2001, at which time the U.S. State Department issued a warning against all but essential travel to the country.

The political unrest was, of course, disturbing. But it also added still another dimension to our experience of Katmandu – the smells of sizzling meat, incense and exhaust fumes mixed with the sounds of vendors hawking their wares, honking horns, screeching brakes and the haunting flute music (all absorbed while trying to dodge foot traffic and bicycles).

All of this coming together was an assault on the senses that was at once shocking, stressful, fascinating, exciting and energizing. Where else but Katmandu can you simultaneously see a cremation taking place on one bank of the great Ganges River, a colorful prayer ritual in the middle of the river, and a holy celebration on the other bank? We will never forget this overwhelming experience which took place near the Temple of Pashupatinath, one of the most sacred Hindu sites in the world.

Nepal is bordered by Tibet and India and situated in the Himalayan Mountains with the legendary highest mountain in the world, Mount Everest, at the pinnacle at 29,000 feet. In fact, nine of the ten highest mountain peaks in the world are in Nepal. The scenery is breathtaking and somewhat surreal throughout the country.

The 1,600 year old historical center of Katmandu, Nepal's capitol and largest city, has been declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO because of its rich history, cultural treasures and magnificent diversity. As if to ensure that it stays that way, we did not find any U.S. brand chain hotels, restaurants or coffee shops, all of which now penetrate most of the civilized world.

Dunbar Square is at the center with its ancient temples, pagodas and shrines, all with intricately carved roofs, doors and windows. It includes the Great Bell, which is said to ward off evil spirits when rung; the Jagganath Temple, with its erotic carvings; the Royal Palace, and the Golden Gate. We visited the home of Kumari Devi, Nepal's living goddess, who made an appearance while we were there.

Katrina and I had drinks with our tour guide on the rooftop of Café du Temple near Dunbar Square. We felt like voyeurs in a magical land of teeming markets, monkeys and architectural showpieces.

We wandered for a pleasant two hours along the city's most famous thoroughfare, Freak Street. This was not its original name, but the street was so named because of the dusty-haired "freaks" who populated it in the hippy days of the 1960s and 1970s. The moniker stuck and is still the official name even though much of the original incense smell, love-ins, prayer wheels, new age shops, and cheap hotels are gone.

We did not feel the effects of the high altitude since we were mainly in the valleys with their lush rice paddies, green jungles and wild flowers. The light-headed feeling was to come later on this trip when we arrived in Lhasa, the 12,000 foot high capitol of the majestic Tibetan highland at the top of the world, but that's the subject of another story.

We were not surprised to read that the venerable travel magazine, *Condé Nast Traveler*, ranked Katmandu in its annual survey for the first time in the top ten of the most popular Asian cities. When the unrest has come to a rest, we'd highly recommend a visit.

Iran: A peaceful sojourn into the “Axis of Evil”

When people heard that Katrina and I were going to Iran, the question was always why. My response then and now is the same. Iran is a magnificent and historically important country. It contains nine World Heritage Sites as designated by UNESCO. These are the cultural and natural sites that are considered to have outstanding universal value. Only 20 countries – including Greece, China and Italy – have more. Since Katrina and I had already visited those, it was time for us to tour Iran.

“Axis of evil? Most visitors, after experiencing this friendliest of countries, couldn’t agree less. For culture seekers, Iran has magnificent ruins of ancient cities, glorious mosques and mausoleums and museums so interesting they’re bound to leave your feet sore.” This is the way Lonely Planet begins its book on Iran and, after having traveled there, I agree. An Indianapolis friend who recently returned from there had the same opinion.

The State Department official travel warning on Iran is “to carefully consider the risks of travel” there, saying “American citizens may be subject to harassment or arrest.” We do not have diplomatic or consular relations with Iran and Americans must rely on the Swiss Embassy for consular services. Our experience indicates that the risks are minimal and well worth the rewards.

It’s important to separate the government of Iran from its people, who could not have been friendlier or more helpful. Upon introducing ourselves, they would typically say, “Welcome to Iran. We are glad you came to visit.” This began on the Iran Air flight from Amsterdam to Tehran with two of the passengers. One gave me a card with her contact information in one of the towns we were visiting in the event we needed any assistance.

Iranians we encountered also wanted to know what people in the U.S. thought about them. A carpet vendor said, “People think we are all religious extremists with nuclear weapons and beards down to our stomachs, but Iran is actually very safe for tourists.” Our guide was quick to agree, stating that they are not terrorists, but warm, friendly, welcoming human beings. We detected no animosity, only warmth and curiosity. One shop owner in Tehran gave us a pack of chewing gum as a friendship gift.

Of course, we couldn’t just pack and go. We had to apply for our visa through an authorized tour company, Asian Pacific Adventures, who did a fine job in booking our trip, arranging for the driver and guide and setting up the itinerary. They secured an approval letter from the Iranian government that was sent to the Pakistani Embassy in Washington since Iran does not have an embassy in the U.S. We then contracted with a visa

company to secure the visa, all of which took about three months.

We were the only Americans on the flight to Tehran and the only passengers subject to additional scrutiny, including a 45-minute delay in airport passport control. As we sat waiting while the authorities further studied and checked our passports and visas, I was afraid that maybe there was some technical problem with the visa that would cause them to deny us entry into the country—or, worse yet, allow us entry but in captivity.

As it turned out, they asked only a few questions, finger printed us and then allowed us to proceed through customs. Thankfully, our bags were still there and our guide was still waiting in the entry hall. Our guide, Hamid, was required by the government to keep us in his sight until he deposited us at the same spot eight days later, except for the time when we were in our assigned hotel, of course. He was also required to file our itinerary with the government so they knew our whereabouts at all times.

At one point, we drove past the uranium enrichment plant and as I reached for the camera, he said “No, no, no!”

There were also other rules to follow. Because of their religion, there is no alcohol, dancing, music or outward signs of affection between the sexes. There is no dress code for men, although shorts are frowned upon. As with all women in the country, Katrina had to wear a scarf on her head and a loose-fitting jacket that reached to mid-thigh whenever she was outside of the hotel room.

It is not necessary to wear chadors, the traditional clothing which is a one piece cloak covering the whole body. Women seem to be wearing their scarves farther back with more hair showing. Change is coming. The government can't stop it. We even saw some couples boldly holding hands.

Even wearing the scarf, Katrina attracted attention. Many groups of girls took her picture with their cell phones and some asked to have their picture taken with her, presumably because of her blue eyes and blond hair escaping the scarf.

Space doesn't allow me to mention all of the magnificent sights we visited, which you can read about in tour books. It's a shame that there are so few tourists anywhere in this country. The cities of Shiraz, Yazd and Esfahan all are potentially world class tourist destinations. At one World Heritage Site, Katrina, our driver and guide and I were the only visitors. On the entire visit, we encountered only one other American couple and only three busloads of European tourists.

One marvelous site I should mention specifically is Persepolis, one of the most important archeological wonders of the ancient world. A 2,500-year-old masterpiece and capitol of the first Persian Empire in the fourth century BC, it was a relatively cosmopolitan place, and for many

Iranians its ruins are a reminder of their Persian heritage.

The rest of us should be reminded as well. Cyrus the Great established this first Persian Empire, which would become the largest, most powerful kingdom on earth in what has been called the world's first religiously and culturally tolerant empire. Ultimately it comprised more than 23 different peoples who coexisted peacefully under a central government. Persia was arguably the world's first superpower.

"We have nostalgia to be a superpower again," said Saced Laylaz, an economic and political analyst in Tehran, "and the country's nuclear ambitions are directly related to this desire. It was a stable superpower for more than a thousand years." Still today, it is said that inside every Persian is an emperor.

Other interesting information we acquired:

- At the Tehran airport I exchanged \$100 for \$1 million Iranian Rials, reflecting an exchange rate of 10,000 to 1. Inflation has hit the country hard.
- Because of the embargo, you cannot use credit cards, ATM cards or travelers checks. We had to bring enough cash to last the entire trip.
- The former U.S. Embassy compound is now a museum and historical site known as the Den of U.S. Espionage. It was the site of the C.I.A. plotting of the 1953 coup that installed the Shah as well as the 1979-81 hostage crisis.
- While the region of Shiraz, which we visited, produces great wine grapes, wine is no longer made there because it is forbidden by law. They eat some the grapes while exporting the rest to other countries for wine making.
- The culinary offerings don't vary much: lamb or chicken kebabs plus quince and squash stew. The food is not very spicy but has large quantities of herbs, such as mint, dill, parsley, coriander and chives. Almost everything is accompanied by rice. The other staple is bread.
- We did not smoke a qalyan or water pipe on this trip. Tea, sugar and a qalyan are served in many tea houses and homes. The smoke is sweet and rich and the air can become quite hazy.
- There are no direct flights from the U.S. but you can reach Tehran through a number of European and Middle Eastern cities. We connected in Amsterdam. Tehran is 8.5 hours ahead of Eastern Time and is about 14 flying hours from Indianapolis.
- Oil is the number one industry and Iran has the greatest oil reserves in the world next to Saudi Arabia. This fact and its strategic location as a bridge between Europe and Asia provide the country with a major advantage in seeking power.

Kaliningrad, Russia: Encounter with the Russian police

At 10 p.m. on a Sunday evening, Katrina and I were waiting in the Kaliningrad, Russia bus and train terminal for a 10:45 p.m. overnight bus to Vilnius, Lithuania. The terminal was damp, cold, dark and foreboding.

Two Russian policemen approached me and asked to see my “papers”. After a cursory look at my passport and visa, they escorted me into a small cinder block “interrogation” room, which the three of us and my backpack barely squeezed into. They proceeded to further examine my passport and visa and question me about drugs, my reasons for being in the city and any persons I met with while there.

They instructed me to empty my pockets and wallet and conducted a thorough body search. One of them scanned my money with a blue light gadget while the other opened my backpack and began taking things out. I told them to do one thing at a time. I am certain part of their method was to distract the “victim” while one of them helped himself to any cash and jewelry.

I am also certain this was a shakedown for a bribe and probably to harass an American for sport. My impression was that very few Americans visit Kaliningrad for obvious reasons. Probably because we were the only Americans, or tourists for that matter, in the bus/train terminal, we were targeted. Since we couldn’t appeal for help from the police for protection against the police, the only recourse would have been the American Embassy, but there was none. Also, this Russian province is geographically separated from the rest of Russia.

Katrina was told to wait outside of the interrogation room while I was being questioned and searched. She and I were both afraid we were going to miss the bus to Vilnius, which makes only one trip each 24 hours. This, of course, added pressure to the situation and made it more likely we would cave in and offer them whatever cash it took to get out of there. Time pressure was undoubtedly part of their plan.

The police and I could not speak each other’s language, but I did manage to communicate a little white lie to them, saying I was an acquaintance of the general manager of the top hotel in the city, which is where we had stayed. I had seen his name on a business card at the hotel and fortunately remembered it. There was an immediate change in their attitude and behavior when they thought I knew someone in the city to whom I could report their attempted shakedown.

At that point, I was released just in time to catch the bus, but we didn’t relax until it actually left the terminal and then the province.

The policemen stood below the bus window staring at us until the bus pulled away.

Katrina later said, jokingly (I think), that she was tempted to take a souvenir photo of the two policemen and me as we came out of the interrogation room, but thought (correctly) they might not appreciate the humor! She also pointed out the positive – I would have another interesting travel story.

We later discussed whether we should stop traveling to potentially dangerous places. The answer was, and is, No! It's all a part of the big travel picture and the experiences would not be complete if we started excluding some destinations because we might run into a problem.

Sarajevo, Bosnia: Not exactly a ride on a city bus

Katrina and I were on vacation in Sarajevo, Bosnia and attempting to go to Prestina, Kosovo. Rental car companies did not allow their cars to be driven to Kosovo and there were no scheduled flights. This was in the aftermath of the war in Bosnia and during the unrest in Kosovo.

The public bus company also had discontinued service to Kosovo. Since it was too far to walk, the last option to go to Kosovo was a private bus company which was located in a small shabby building near the public bus company parking lot. It was either this or return home and not continue on our trip, which was to take us from Kosovo to Macedonia and then Albania before returning to Indianapolis. We had already been to Serbia and Montenegro on this trip.

After some haggling, I negotiated a price for the 14-hour bus trip. Following this hassle, Katrina was very reluctant to board the bus, which was already an hour late in leaving. She had an uneasy feeling, stemming in part from the rundown (and probably badly maintained) condition of the bus and the behavior of the driver and others hanging around the bus as well as those who had already boarded.

Hearing our discussion about whether to take the bus trip, a guy who apparently worked for the bus company, came over to tell Katrina in broken English that “My mother is on this bus!” This struck Katrina as an odd “sell job” and provided no reassurance. Over Katrina’s strenuous objection, we stayed on the bus as it pulled away from the station and, to her further chagrin, I fell asleep immediately while she stayed awake worrying and desperately needing to use a restroom.

Despite having a non smoking sign in the bus, the driver, along with many of the passengers, smoked during most of the trip. Two drivers alternated driving and made periodic stops at places with holes in the ground for toilets. We drove over curving mountainous terrain. When we stopped for gasoline, the driver kept the engine running and continued smoking.

When we crossed into Kosovo about 2 a.m., the bus had to stop and all passengers were required to get off the bus and line up while our bags were opened and inspected by officials carrying flashlights. At the same time, dogs sniffed all the luggage.

At some point during this bus odyssey, we went from tragedy to dark humor and began laughing, which was probably healthier than facing reality. Nonetheless, we were relieved to pull into Pristina and get off that bus, regardless of what may have awaited us in this wild west-like town and the rest of the journey.

As is our custom, we had no hotel reservations and only a general idea of what we were going to do. But that's part of the excitement.

Later on this trip, we had to walk across the border into Albania carrying our bags because no public transportation or taxi would take people into the country. Things got a little dicey from there, but that's another story.

As a footnote, we found that Sarajevo had recovered nicely from the war and was a dynamic and vibrant city. Another town in Bosnia, Mostar, was another matter. It still had not recovered from the bombings and you could still see the bullet holes in walls throughout the city, along with abandoned buildings with trees and weeds growing inside. It was still a disaster.