

The Big Bus Crash

NEPAL TO INDIA

From Yakety Yak: Bombay to Beijing by Bicycle
by Russell McGilton

‘What happened?’ I asked a Nepalese man wearing oversized glasses and standing at the edge of a torn embankment. He was a dot in the crowd of hundreds who were clambering around the wreckage, some 10 metres below.

‘A motorbike was coming this way, the bus was overtaking, and the bike hit the front,’ he pointed under the bus. ‘There. You can see the dead people.’

The impact of the head-on collision had caused the bus to shimmy off the road down a steep embankment and gouge a deep brown scar into a flooded paddy field. The bus lay on its side, the lip sipping the muddy water around it like a stranded fish.

Next to the bus, a body had been covered with a woollen blanket, as if to warm it up. Though the external damage to the bus was minor, six people died in the crash when the seats crumpled into rib-cracking dominoes, their weak seat-mountings breaking loose in the collision.

Fifty metres from the bus lay a red motorcycle helmet, upturned and half-filled with brown water, a solitary island in the muddy pond. The helmet’s owner lay some 100 metres away on his twisted back, head upturned, staring at nothing. Blood trickled from his mouth, across his forehead and over his spiky black hair. He must not have had time to even look surprised as his body took the brunt of the bus’s full force as it took the corner. The impact had knocked both his shoes off, revealing pilled blue socks, one with a hole in it.

Yet, his injuries, like the bus, appeared to be somewhat superficial; a mangled lip was the only mark that showed he had kissed death at all. Miraculously, his passenger survived and was now in the midst of being driven, just as madly as

the bus that had dislodged him from his seat, to a hospital in Pokhara, a town Bec and I had just come from.

Our trekking done, we had taken the bus for Kathmandu, screeching through the mad, winding hills when it suddenly halted and became part of a long line of vehicles. Despite no wreckage blocking the road, no one could move on until the police arrived. We had been there for an hour already.

Locals vendors selling popcorn, beans and coconut soon took advantage of the calamity. Restaurant shacks were filled with bored, hot customers fanning themselves in the two o'clock heat as they sipped chai, clumped *dal bhat* into their hands and fingered it into their mouths, or chewed tobacco. The excitement and horror of the crash had apparently left them with a gnawing appetite.

The bus driver was nowhere to be seen, having legged it over the hill in fear for his life. As is the custom in Nepal, if a driver causes bodily harm to his fellow passengers or pedestrians, they have every right to beat him to death. This begs the question of why, if you were a bus driver with forty people sitting behind you who might just beat the crap out of you for any traffic discrepancy, you don't just drive a little bit more safely.

This obvious truism was something I wished to impart through the medium of a clenched fist to our driver. Despite the horrors we had all just seen, he was, now that the police had arrived and cleared the traffic, already wildly taking on blind corners, the back wheels struggling to stay on the road as trucks intent on obliterating us swerved out the way at the last second. The worst of it was when our bus and another of the same company cut off a rogue taxi that had failed to give way to them. Arrowing him into the middle of the road, they stopped traffic in both directions. The bus drivers both leapt out and took turns yelling and shaking their fists at the taxi driver, who shrank into his leather seat then under the dash.

'It is far safer,' I said to Bec as we passed yet another crashed bus, its body disintegrating into a rock cutting, 'to ride a bicycle.'

But Bec's eyes were filled with tears and nothing I could say could brush them away.

Thankfully, this event did not dampen her enthusiasm for cycling.

We had rushed to Kathmandu after I realised that my Nepalese visa was a few days from running out. What's more, I didn't have enough time on my Indian visa to do our trip. I waited a week in long lines at the embassy while the slow and convoluted bureaucratic process of Indian diplomacy turned its dusty cogs.

While waiting for the visa, we went in search of a bike for Bec, and ended up getting one from Narendra for a hard US\$200. It was an old aluminium bike that had been cycled from Germany to Kathmandu. Narendra gave it a full service and replaced the bearings, cables and brakes. We had panniers made up from an ambitious bag maker who, unlike others, did not wave us away into the rain.

A week later, loaded up and ready to go, we kissed then launched off on our maiden voyage together, down the bumpy streets of Kathmandu. The plan was to take the same route that Uros and I had cycled up but heading south, through Hetauda and onwards to the Indian border town of Rauxal. I figured that, as most of the journey – about 100 of the 150 kilometres – was downhill, we would make the trip in no time. When I mentioned this to Bec at a chai stall, she flipped.

'Why didn't you tell me we were going to do 150 kilometres today?' she bit at me while buses and trucks thundered past.

'But there's not so much traffic this way. Besides, it's the quickest way to the border, and I don't want to have to pay another US\$50 for a new visa.'

We argued viciously, putting both of us in a horrible mood. But once we calmed down, we hugged and admitted that we were both nervous. I was worried about Bec, and she was terrified by the enormity of the journey ahead.

Although it was only 30 kilometres, the trip to Phalsong took us all day, the steamy hills blinding our eyes with drops of salty sweat. It was where Uros and I had stopped for breakfast; now, as night was falling, we checked out two hotels, both of which were squalid inside.

‘Let’s keep going,’ I said to Bec, who was on the point of collapse. We pedalled onwards uphill, and eventually got a nice, clean room upstairs in a hotel with a friendly family. We hauled our bikes up precarious steps in silence. After we had both had a wash, Bec sat on the side of the bed staring at the wall, lost.

‘Bec? Are you okay?’

Her eyes swivelled for a moment before she burst into tears, sobbing uncontrollably.

‘I-I don’t think I can do this,’ she choked. ‘I don’t think I can handle this at all. I’m not going to make it as a cycle tourer.’

‘Give it time, Bec,’ I put my arms around her. ‘You’ve just got to get your legs.’

‘I’m holding you back, aren’t I?’

‘No.’ Well, okay, she was, but I couldn’t say that! Besides, she was new to this. I’m sure I was just as slow when I first started this trip. And, after all, it was flat. ‘Come on. It’ll take time. I’m sorry I yelled at you today. I wasn’t showing much patience.’ I gave her a kiss. ‘Chin up, sunshine.’

The anxiety of getting out of Nepal with my expired visa was chewing at me like the bedbugs that kept me awake later that night.

‘I’ll work it out,’ I said, speaking of the Nepalese immigration officials. ‘I’ll just walk around with a sense of authority; intimidate them.’

‘Wing it, you mean?’

‘Yeah. Wing it. Piece of piss. It’s a two-month visa. I arrived in Nepal on the thirteenth, so, I figure that if we get to the border by the thirteenth, I might be able to argue that it really is two months and not specifically sixty days.’

‘Or bribe ’em.’

‘Yeah,’ I said with a wave of my hand. ‘This country is skanky with it.’

Two days later, at the border ...

‘Your visa has expired.’

I blinked at the grey, weary eyes of the Nepalese immigration official.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Your visa. It has expired. Today is the thirteenth May. You entered on the thirteenth March. Sixty days only.’

‘No. Two months. The visa is for two months. It says there.’

I pointed to the visa restrictions in my passport and, though, yes, it did say sixty days, I tried to use his ignorance of English to my advantage.

‘Sixty days is two months,’ I said. ‘Thirteenth to the thirteenth.’

‘No! You should have left on the eleventh.’

‘But it says “*from* the thirteenth” rather than “*at* the thirteenth”. That gives me an extra two days.’

He wasn’t buying any of it. He leaned on the wooden desk, creaking it a little.

‘You have to apply for a new visa. Fifty dollar US and one dollar US for each day over. Total fifty-two dollar US you have to pay.’

‘That’s so much money!’ I pleaded. ‘We don’t have that much money. We’re ... we’re cyclists. We use bicycles because it is cheap and ...’ then, overdoing it, ‘we want to see your *beautiful* country!’

He chewed on a betel nut and spat it out. ‘Fifty-two dollar you must pay.’

‘It’s so much! There isn’t anything else you can do?’

‘Fifty-two dollar you must pay.’

‘I don’t have that much money on me. How about ... I give you some money?’

‘No.’

‘Say,’ I reached inside my wallet, ‘ten dollars?’

‘I cannot.’

‘You can buy a lot of beer with that money.’

He looked at the visa again then spun it around at me. ‘What does this entry date say? Twenty-three?’

I looked at the number one of the thirteenth; it could pass for a two.

‘Why, yes! That looks like a twenty-three to me!’

He laughed. ‘No, I don’t think.’

He was silent for a moment, flicking my passport, my life, in his hands. ‘You go to India without exit stamp. Okay?’

‘Sure.’ I went to pick up my passport, but he held onto it, causing me to trip.

‘Fifty-two dollar you have to pay. Fill out form ...’

As he handed it to me, I protested again.

‘That’s so much money. How about ... twenty dollars US I give you?’

‘No, no. New visa.’ Just as I went to fill out the new visa form, he got up and said, ‘You stay here. My friend. He’s at hotel.’

‘I can’t stay here. My visa’s expired.’

‘No, no,’ he struggled through his English. ‘You ... stay ... he’s eating rice.’

‘Oh ...’ and so I sat. Outside, Bec was having kittens.

‘You okay?’

‘Yeah. I think I might be able to wrangle it. He’s got to talk to his friend; I’m not sure why.’

We sat under a tree watching a chameleon bob up and down before changing from a light orange to the brown colour of the trunk it was perched on. If only I could do that with my visa.

An hour passed before the official returned with his smiling friend and ushered me into the office. The friend filled out the paperwork, writing my passport details in a book.

‘You arrived on the twenty-third.’

‘Right.’

'Money. Twenty dollar,' he said abruptly without looking up, and I counted out the one-dollar bills. With his pen, he did something that I could have easily done at the hotel – he scrawled over the date, replacing the 1 with a 2.