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Vientiane, Laos

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(in Dec.)

Dear Friends:

So begins the last chapter of our trip. The vacation took us through six countries and 9,500 miles of traveling. Heading North from the boarder of India, we were soon in the rolling foothills of the Himalaya Mountains. Within fifty miles the road began to turn and drop like an insane roller coaster. As we continued, small waterfalls would appear by the edge of the road, most of which shared the road with us before dropping off to the river beds far below. On one side of the road a cliff 200 or 300 feet would tower above us with rocks waiting for the smallest reason to fall. On the other side of the road a riverbed the same distance below lay with polished white boulders from the rushing water, hoping that more rocks would soon fall.

Climbing, descending, turning, twisting, we crept over the first 8,500 ft. mountain pass and again dropped to just a few feet above sea level. In the valley, farmers worked to make a living from the few square acres of level land. Terraced rice paddies, so green you could hardly believe your eyes, lay everywhere ready for harvest.

Climbing again we headed for the last pass which would take us into the Katmandu Valley and the capital city of Nepal.

The total drive of 130 miles took us eight hours, but it was one of the most enjoyable trips of my life. Never before have I seen mountains so beautiful. I would have given anything to have been able to stop and climb among the mountains for days.

Our only disappointment from Nepal turned out to be the weather. The low clouds would not allow us to see the high snow-covered peaks to the North. We were told that on a clear day, Mt. Everest could just barely be seen with its head in the clouds over 40 miles away.

It is hard to talk about the country of Nepal. It is so different from any place I have ever visited before. The country is very poor. It is said of the little kingdom, "If it should blow away, no one would miss it for years." As the book

published by the country states, "The Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal is famous for only two things.. it's Gurkha soldiers, who have long distinguished themselves in the British and Indian armies, and for possession of the highest mountain in the world (Everest)."

The only way to describe the city of Katmandu is to say it is old. The many temples with their handcarved wooden art work are found in abundance throughout the city. Many of the carved windows date back to the 6th and 7th centuries.

Nepal is the land of the craftsmen, and curios can be bought for next to nothing. Relics from the border country of Tibet, Ghorka Knives, and brass wares are besieged on you by everyone as you walk down the market street. Of course, the sales talk of a few of the people got through to me and I am now the proud owner of a Ghorka Knife, which is guaranteed to cut the head of a large water buffalo off with one swing.

After the usual temple tours and walking the streets to take pictures, we settled down for a few days of relaxation. The Peace Corps volunteers in Nepal have discovered a new game of cards called Bridge. Out of the five nights in Nepal, we played until 3 A.M. on four of them.

A change of plans in our travels came about with the sale of the motorcycle. We had planned to start back to India on Wednesday, but instead we flew back Friday. The extra days of sleep were great.

Miles, my friend, had to be back in England for college by the 15th and I was due back in Vientiane the 10th, so we parted ways in Katmandu. Flying to Calcutta for four days, a different view of India was observed. One evening an American friend and I went to a local theater. It was raining when we left the theater for the hotel. Until that time, it had never really sunk in that some people just do not have a place called home. As we walked down the street we saw hundreds of people sleeping under cars and next to buildings trying to keep dry. Old women, men, children, mothers with small babies, dogs, cows, and sheep would all be under the same eaves trying to keep dry. By day these people would beg for food and money. They would cook their food in the gutter and eat in the street. At night they would sleep in areas off the street when it was dry, or under the cars when it rained. The rest of the stay in Calcutta was spent seeing the things that we were supposed to see.

Because of the sale of the motorcycle, I was able to take in two more countries than the original plan called for. Flying from Calcutta to the capital of East Pakistan, Dacca, another interesting three days were spent.

Dacca is a city of little excitement. Old Dacca, the most interesting part of the city, is little more than a replica of India. Staying at the Peace Corps Hostel, I was able to gain quite a feeling for the problems that the Americans are having in the country. If a person were smart, he would forget he was American and not use the word "India". Just three days after leaving the country, the whole thing blew up. As I was waiting to go through customs in Bangkok I read of the start of the war in India-Pakistan.

Flying from Dacca to Rangoon, Burma, the last day of my trip began. Because of problems from the North, a 24-hour stay is all that foreigners are allowed in Rangoon. As soon as our plane landed we headed for the city to make as much of the short time we had. The city is called the City of the Golden Pagoda. Because

of the rain, our trip was not golden.

The Golden Shwedagon Pagoda, is by far the largest in Rangoon. Lucky for us, most of it had a roof over it. Due to the rain, this is about all of Rangoon we were able to see.

After a trip like this, it is hard to put into words all that one sees and all that one feels. The history of the past thousand years has passed by in the form of old buildings. In some places the people are living the same as they did hundreds of years ago. I've read in many books how throughout the world people were without food, but it was only once last few months when I really began to believe it. For an American family to move from one location to another, it sometimes takes several trucks to move their goods. Here in India some of the families can put all of their belongings into a paper bag the same size as we take our food home from the store in a paper bag. Some don't even have the paper bag.

About all that can be said for a trip like this is it was a greater education in itself than all of the books I have ever read. I only wish it were possible for all who will read this letter to have seen with me.

Back in Vientiane at last, and boy, is it great to have some good American food. The first week home was spent sleeping and eating. Already, all of eighteen pounds I lost on our trip have been replaced. My only regret is the other sixteen don't find their way back. Had to bring things up to date answer a lot of questions all over the school will be entering the new year. This will mark the end of the rains, we hope, and the start of the new season. At night it will get as low as 60° and in the daytime it will get hot as 90°. This year the school will have the largest number of students has ever had. The total number will be around 3300. The English section, which I work, will have about 1000. I have had several new people from the States and we have already had several return to the States. Six of the old team will be coming back for another year and those who have left this year will all be going for the U.S.A.I.V. or go back to college.

This next year I will be teaching only Hindi and Khmer. Of course, there are always a few other little jobs around that one has to do like the stamp club. The stamp club is still going strong and any more stamps that are around the house will be appreciated. The ones we have most of all are the old stamps. Those before 1964. Thanks again to a friend who has taken the time to send them.

Last year I used the letters of these boys as a newsletter. All of these boys were accepted for scholarships to the States this year. At present, Somyone is in High School in Kansas City, Missouri, and is in Lafayette, Ill.; and Chakry is in Coraopolis, Pa. Having had letters from all the boys, they seem to like America very much, and all seem to be doing quite well in their school work. The only problem one of the boys seems to be having is, "He would like to see his mother and Dad for just a few minutes. He doesn't miss them, but he sure would like to see them (??)". I guess that's about it for this letter. Best wishes from Laos.

And since this did get off a bit late, Happy Holidays!

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IVS/USAID  
c/o American Embassy  
APO San Francisco

Jim

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