

# **“I’m Studying Monkeys; What Do You Do?”— Youth and Travelers in Nepal**

Jane Teas<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

“Another special issue during youth is the enormous value placed upon change, transformation, and movement, and the consequent abhorrence of stasis . . .

“At times the focus of change may be upon the self, and the goal is then to be moved. Thus, during youth we see the most strenuous, self-conscious, and even frenzied efforts at self-transformation, using whatever religious, cultural, therapeutic, or chemical means available. At other times, the goal may be to create movement in the outer world, to move others; then we may see efforts at social and political change that in other stages of life rarely possess the same single-minded determination. And on other occasions, the goal is to move through the world, and we witness a frantic geographic restlessness, wild swings of upward or downward social mobility, or a compelling psychological need to identify with the highest and the lowest, the most distant and apparently alien” (Keniston 1965:10).

An individual in America grows up in a parentally guided and restricted manner. By society’s standards, upon attainment of a high school diploma, an individual is free to choose his life-style—be it in a college, in a job, or even in the state-supported welfare system. Only infrequently do outside authority figures govern actual life-styles. This freedom to choose how to live—to be in a vulnerable position with no real experience in life or the job market—often creates a situation in which an individual no longer feels in control of his or her environment. By traveling, a disaffected youth can effect his or her own changes of time and place, exercising discretion over the interactions, if any, in which he or she will participate. In a way, traveling becomes a ritual process by which a youth can control, albeit in a temporal manner, his or her own destiny. The skills and confidence gained by a journey from the known and often uncontrollable to the unknown and partially controllable can then be utilized upon one’s return. According to a principle of Montessori education, once an individual feels in control of his or her world, he or she can change it, or at least direct it.

Traveler recruitment occurs through mass media and personal acquaintances. The myth of the traveler has been glorified through books such as *The Drifters* by Michener (1971) and Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) and *Lonesome Traveller* (1960). In these exciting books, Kerouac covers life on the Los Angeles waterfront, Mexico, New York, Morocco, Paris and London. He reveals a way of life—the life of the road, where men travel, live, and love, freely. This he presents as his unique philosophy of self-fulfillment.

Movies, such as “Two for the Road,” old campfire songs, such as “Happy Wanderer,” and modern tunes, such as “Horse with No Name,” all perpetuate the myth that traveling is a self-fulfilling and intrinsically valuable experience. Charter flights have blossomed in recent years, causing major airline carriers to lower their prices in a bid to maintain competitiveness. Quiz programs and local drawings feature travel as the ultimate prize. Travel posters, calendars, movies, foreign restaurants, magazines, TV specials, and the aspirations or experiences of friends and acquaintances: Everywhere one turns, travel and change are featured as good, and living in one place is bad. There are exceptions, such as Carole King’s protest song, “Doesn’t Anyone Stay in One Place Anymore?” But, in general, travel is portrayed as broadening, an unqualified good.

## Travel as a Life-style

In this paper, the traveler is defined as a person who only travels.<sup>2</sup> That is, he or she neither works nor lives in a foreign country and is usually supported by savings from a previous job. By my definition, youthful travelers are away from home for at least three months and seldom more than one year. Age generally ranges from twenty to thirty-five, with the greatest concentration between the ages of twenty and twenty-seven. Most travelers are men. In fact, in a count I made in three Kathmandu restaurants, only five of thirty-seven Westerners were female. Most travelers are from middle-class backgrounds and hail from either California or New York, and particularly the major cities in those states. Of approximately 500 acquaintances made between 1967 and 1972, only forty or so were from the Midwest or South, and none were from the states of Oklahoma, Arkansas, or Wyoming. European travelers are primarily from France, Italy, England, and Germany. Scandinavia, Switzerland, and Ireland are not as well represented, and I have never met a Greek traveling.

A traveler's educational background usually includes some college studies. I have never met anyone with less than one year of college education, but I have also met only one MD and no PhD's. Some travelers are teachers who are either out of work or on a year's leave of absence, and some are nurses. But the majority classify themselves as "students," implying that they might go back to college some day. Occupations, past intellectual pursuits, and aspirations for the future are seldom topics for discussion, however. Rather, the prevailing attitude among travelers is that it is the "here and now" that is important.

The travelers' hierarchy is based on length of time spent traveling, level of poverty while traveling, and amount of discomfort experienced while traveling. To wit, initiation into the society of the traveler is through personal hardship endured while traveling as inexpensively as possible for as long as possible. In other words, going overland from Europe to India via public transportation constitutes an automatic "in." For those traveling the other direction, hitch-hiking across Australia is equivalent.

The first three months of travel are much like probation. Because school vacations are no longer than three months, traveling longer than the summer vacationers is an initial test of one's endurance, as well as a declaration of one's serious intent to be a traveler rather than a member of a society elsewhere. After nine months, few will challenge one's supreme status. This concept of duration heightening status is based on the notion that the longer one stays in one place, the more one has learned, which may be completely fallacious.

The economics of traveling is probably the most important status attribute and unifying feature among travelers. Cheapness is essential. Third-class trains have more status than first; riding on top of a bus has more status than riding inside a bus; and Eurail passes and private cars both have more status than airplanes. Anything that is cheap and uncomfortable is better than anything that is expensive and comfortable. Tours generally have less status than anything except flying, primarily because the problems of traveling, including tickets, visas, itinerary, and accommodations, are all taken care of. Still more important, tours do not constitute an individual activity. The more exotic tours, such as those to Everest Base Camp, are permissible, but are still looked down upon by those who go on their own. Unusual modes of transport, such as camels and horses, as well as hitch-hiking, also have great social value.

Among travelers, pain is equated with good, and hardship is highly respected. In a way, it is an inverted work ethic. Travelers do no work; everything, from food to housing to transportation, is obtained by an exchange of money. Therefore, to justify their existence, to "pay" for the privilege of doing nothing, and to become the envy of their friends, travelers seek pain.

## Symbols

Symbols of a traveler vary from peasant-style clothes, purchased in a foreign country, to jewelry, especially rings, bracelets, and amulets, typically with a prayer or magical prescription. Headgear, either a scarf or a long piece of material wound native-style around the head, is a frequent aspect of the traveler's attire. Everywhere, the most desirable clothes and jewelry are those adopted from the peasant or nomad. For example, in Nepal, Tibetan dress and jewelry are exclusively sought; although the Tibetans have low social standing among the Nepalis, their mystery has been perpetuated through popular cultural materials in the West (e.g., books such as *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* [David-Neel 1932]). In addition, because Tibetans are outsiders in Nepalese society, they tend to be more friendly to Westerners.

Thus, it is apparent that, among youthful travelers, a certain "fashion consciousness" prevails. Interestingly, styles also change. For example, in the spring of 1971, Balinese skirts were "in" for women, and Afghan shirts for both men and women. In the fall of 1972, Tibetan dresses were "in" for women, whereas Balinese skirts had fallen out of favor. Afghan shirts, however, remained fashionable. In addition, a shift occurred in 1972, when travelers began making less of an effort to adopt foreign dress. For the first time, I noted four college T-shirts and one Shell service station attendant's shirt. Perhaps this was an indication of a realignment with Western values, or it may

have been the signal of the increasing insularity of travelers in their own travelers' "society."

This shift in symbols can be illustrated by the change in mode of attire of two travelers I met in Nepal. These two individuals, who had recently completed two-year service programs with the Peace Corps in India, came to Kathmandu to do some hiking. Upon arrival, they wore loose pajama-like pants, made of light-weight cotton, commonly worn by the peasant population of northern India. Although appropriate for the climate of Nepal, this attire was worn neither by the indigenous nor the traveler populations there. Gradually, during their three months in Kathmandu, these two travelers began wearing jeans, thereby identifying with other travelers rather than with the native population of the neighboring country.

The lack of a wristwatch is another important symbol of the traveler. Perhaps because knowing the correct time is such an integral part of American life, not wearing a watch has become a form of rebellion. Alternately, it may be an attempt to see life from a different time perspective, based on the movement of the sun rather than the movements of the hands of a clock. Or, because watches are a sign of affluence in Asia and the traveler is living what to him or her is a life of poverty, it may be an attempt to manifest symbolically that poverty. Or, of course, it could be a way to prevent the frustration caused by knowing how late a train or bus is. For whatever reason watches are not worn, it is a symbol with practical implications, for watches can be most useful when traveling—especially on those odd occasions when buses and trains do leave on time.

With respect to hairstyles, male travelers generally wear their hair short. In the "Tibetan Dragon," a popular Kathmandu restaurant, seven of the eight male patrons had short (above the nape of the neck) haircuts on one particular night in 1972. At the "Hungry Eye," another restaurant, sixteen of the twenty males had short hair, and at "Himalaya Drinks," four of the five males had short hair. The reason may be Singapore, where men must have short hair in order to travel. Or short hair may prove less problematic with custom officials when crossing borders. In the same restaurants, all the women wore long hair.

Although weight and size limit the number and kinds of possessions that may be carried in a backpack or suitcase, the incredible variety of strange objects carried by travelers is a symbol of the youthful life-style. The first time I went traveling, I carried, among other things, ten pounds of books, including two copies of *The Little Prince*, one in French and one in English. One of my roommates in Kathmandu, a traveler of five months, carried with her the following: clothes, Tibetan dress, a chess set, a large unset garnet, three rings, three necklaces, a sari top, a long skirt, a scarf, posthepatitis therapy (vitamin B, liver extract, and glucose), a toothbrush and toothpaste, a hairbrush, tennis shoes, sandals, slippers, a sleeping bag, *Walden*, two long pieces of silk brocade, a towel, and a small bottle of Indian perfume.

## Crime

Crime among travelers is usually limited to thefts. Physical assault in the form of mugging, rape, or murder is virtually absent. There are rumors that these things happen to travelers, but never that travelers commit such acts. Theft is fairly common. They usually involve money and passports and occasionally clothes. At breakfast one morning in Kathmandu, a theft of money was discussed by the travelers at my table. It had occurred during a full-moon acid party, and the girl considered responsible for the theft was the only one not "tripping." (This runs contradictory to the establishment's viewpoint that crimes are most often committed by individuals who are under the influence of drugs.) The general attitude of the three people at my table was that "rip-offs" were to be expected and that they happen to everyone eventually. This attitude could also be viewed as a rationalization for stealing when the opportunity presents itself. In general, theft appears to function as an informal system of redistribution of wealth.

## Travelers' "Shrines"

A phenomenon of traveling, similar to pilgrimages to religious shrines, is the congregation of youthful travelers in specific places. Matala, Crete, was "the" place in 1967, or so *Life* magazine said. This was followed by Morocco in 1968; Goa, India, in 1969; Kathmandu, Nepal, in 1970; Bali, Indonesia, in 1971; and, according to a friend's mother from Council Bluffs, Iowa, Egypt in 1972. Although I met very few people who had gone to Egypt in 1972, I did see many people wearing Egyptian scarab rings. Beginning in 1969, going overland became a must, and the Kabul-Goa-Kathmandu-Bali-Australia circuit became the most popular route.

The powerful draw and social prestige associated with these places is illustrated by a story, told to me by an acquaintance in Hawaii. A couple whose friends were in Hawaii went to Bali to be married. Because all of their friends were in Hawaii, none of them could attend the wedding. Evidently, the social value of being with friends at the wedding was not as great as being in the place where all of their friends wanted to be, or so I was told.

Unfortunately, once a place becomes "in," it becomes a pilgrimage point for masses of travelers. With this influx, the unique community atmosphere among travelers and between travelers and native populations inevitably

disappears.

### Daily Living

What does a traveler do with his or her day? The day often begins between 8 and 9 a.m., when the traveler rises, eats breakfast, and then begins sightseeing, either in a conventional sense or by just walking around. One woman described her favorite occupation while traveling as going to the market, finding a vacant spot, and just sitting and watching the activity of the people about her.

Normally, sightseeing dissolves into looking at things to buy. An element of entrepreneurship is often part of traveling, because the common motive for buying things (e.g., jewels, religious art objects, and, in Kathmandu, wood-block prints) is to sell them in the States upon one's return or to send them there for friends to sell. It is rumored that a "set" of seventy-seven wood-block prints can be sold for as much as \$500 in the States, having cost the purchaser in Nepal a mere \$35. This may have been true at one time, but rumor now has it that back in the States, it is very difficult to sell these prints unless they have been mounted and framed. Even then, the margin of profit is small. In Kathmandu, however, the manufacture of wood-block prints is a very profitable business for foreign entrepreneurs, who sell their merchandise for eight to ten times the price of similar prints sold in Nepalese shops.

This push to make a deal follows from the general attitude of trying to get something for nothing. Travelers are notorious for under-quoting the cost of living in places. The cheaper one can live, the more status one acquires. Nothing is more disappointing than hearing that "On Crete, two people can live for fifty cents a day, including wine," only to find when one arrives there that one can only drink for fifty cents a day, and in moderation. In one instance in a restaurant in Delhi, a youthful traveler enthusiastically raved about his \$12 journey to Delhi from Istanbul, when his listeners, who had all come overland, knew it cost \$28.

Although it might make waiting for a train or bus more pleasant, meditation and prayer, particularly in public places, are rarely practiced by travelers. Meditation is impractical, as are other forms of worship, partly because of lack of privacy, lack of group social values, and lack of time. However, *I Ching* books are consulted when available, as are astrology charts. There is a great preoccupation with the future, but only insofar as traveling is concerned. This consists primarily of planning where to go next and how to get there. There is often the feeling that, "If I were only in place 'X', I would be happy." It seems that with traveling, too, "The grass is always greener on the other side."

### Social Interactions

Social interactions center around the people one meets while traveling. Frequently, this occurs while eating. In Kathmandu, all the restaurants are small, assuring a solitary traveler the opportunity to share a table with someone and possibly converse. This is the most common way to meet people. Another way for travelers to meet is to travel to secluded areas such as Pokhara, Nepal, where few Westerners go. In these places, members of the traveling set give friendly nods to one another, regardless of age or economic level. On the other hand, in Kathmandu, a center for mass tourism, if one nods at all, it is usually toward members of the same age-dress category. The presence of great numbers of foreigners seems to create a sense of alienation.

Among travelers, intellectual conversations are uncommon; in a way, this may be seen as an extension of the identification with the working or peasant class. Social discourse centers around such questions as: "Where have you been?"; "Where are you going?"; "What did you see?"; "What did you buy?"; "How much did it cost?"; "Where did you eat?"; "Where did you stay?"; and "Were there any major hassles?"

Food is also a fascinating, everpresent topic of conversation, particularly when the food discussed is good. In Kathmandu, as well as in other places, desserts are the focus of attention, with comparisons being made between the apple pie at "Aunt Jane's" and "Chya and Pie," chocolate cake at "Aunt Jane's" and "Unity," and so on. Even people who rarely eat desserts may eat them in quantity in order to have something to talk about with other travelers.

In Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908), a book about Victorian travelers, the main character reminisces about Rome by saying, "Oh, yes, that's where we saw the yellow dog." This type of dialogue—of talking about what was important to one in a given place—is also characteristic of travelers and is indicative of a second, more meaningful stage of interaction and involvement. This second, intermediate stage is also characterized by discussion of and typecasting according to astrological signs.

If sufficient rapport is established, then the third level of interaction may be initiated, in which travelers attempt to relate to one another as individuals. Questions that place a traveler in a socioeconomic context—such as "Where are you from?" or "What college did you attend?"—then become permissible.

In maintaining the standard of noninvolvement, people introduce themselves by their first names only. How-

ever, after getting to know someone, it is very impolite not to ask for the person's address in the States. A couple I met in Bangkok had two address books: one for those whose addresses they had taken out of social necessity and the other for people they intended to see again.

Friendships are loosely woven of shared experiences. It is hard to find someone who is going the same direction, in the same manner, at the same time, and with whom one is also compatible. Couples who begin traveling together often split up while on the road. Seldom do individuals form relationships while abroad, except during short journeys. This may be a result of the imbalance in the male-female ratio. But even women who begin traveling alone often remain uninvolved. Being involved is one more form of being vulnerable. In addition, privacy, even in hotel rooms, is minimal.

Sex is not an important part of traveling—at least not "promiscuous" sex. The lack of privacy and the reluctance to be involved are the primary deterrents. However, there are occasional travelers who become involved in sexual relationships in order to be supported by other people. One such woman confided that she had spent only eighteen dollars in four months of traveling. Institutional sex, in the form of massage parlors, is a frequent topic of conversation among those who have just come from Bangkok. However, three travelers who I came to know well admitted that the massage parlor in Bangkok offered massages, not sex, suggesting that this was just another myth associated with traveling.

## Drugs

Hashish is the most common drug used by travelers and functions as a sort of communion meal. Often, the shared chillum is raised to the forehead, a prayer is uttered, and then the pipe is smoked. Common incantations exist, but few of the people who use these calls know what they mean or in what language they are being spoken. Some claim that the uttered incantation is what the holy men, or Hindu *saddhus*, say before they smoke. However, in the Hindu temples I visited, I never heard any vocalization made by the guru or his immediate followers before a chillum was smoked. If the travelers' incantation does, indeed, have any religious significance, it has probably been taken out of context by Westerners.

In almost any cheap tourist restaurant, a chillum will be passed during a meal. Some restaurants even provide chillums. However, in the two American-run restaurants in Kathmandu, I never saw a smoking implement passed or smoked. In addition, although many Nepalis smoke hashish, I never saw a chillum shared with local inhabitants, unless they, too, were "freaks." The shared chillum has many functions. On the one hand, it is a symbol of group solidarity and a nonthreatening form of involvement. It also serves as an escape from the boredom of eating, sleeping, and sightseeing. In addition, it releases tension and is a bridge to the familiar in an unfamiliar environment.

Of the other drugs, opium is fairly common. LSD and mescaline are the most prized, but the least available. Cocaine is very expensive, and heroin is uncommon but not unknown.

Foods containing sugar often appear to function as an addictive drug. Desserts satisfy the craving for sugar and provide the pleasure of tasting something that tastes almost like it does at home. The tensions of living abroad, the language barriers, the cultural misunderstandings, and the frequently expressed resentments against foreigners all consume a great deal of energy. Possibly, desserts satisfy both physiological and psychological needs among travelers.

## Discussion

Art galleries become claustrophobic and monuments monotonous. Talking with travelers about traveling and watching people go by grow old very quickly. In some ways, traveling is a sterile occupation. So, why do it?

### *Traveling as an Escape from Society*

Timothy Leary, an early advocate of traveling, both of the mind and body, provided the advice, "Turn on, tune in, drop out." His imagery is reminiscent of television viewing. In a way, travelers change countries as others might change the channels of the TV set. Travelers in Asia tend to talk in terms of "getting into," "laid back," and "mellow." Certainly, the concept of "getting into" something supports the idea that travelers feel "out of it" in many aspects of life. The goal of being "laid back" is definitely passive, as is being "mellow." If the goal of travel is to experience other cultures, travelers choose to buffer themselves with Western comforts and conversation, so that the travel experience becomes a visual one. The ideal of the peasant, living in a nonmechanized world, in the true Candidean sense of "tending his own garden," is admired by travelers. But attempts to achieve this ideal—to communicate with peasants and experience their lives—are limited by language barriers and the scarcity of topics of common interest.

### *Traveling as a Means of Redefining Society*

"Freedom's just another word for nothing else to lose," the words of a song written by Kris Kristofferson, tell us a great deal about a traveler. To give up friends, familiar surroundings, and an orderly existence for the freedom of the road can best be understood by the question, "What did he or she hope to find?" The reality of knowing no one, the uncertainty as to what to do in a completely foreign environment, and the boredom and frustrations of everyday life do not explain why people travel. Rather, travelers seek to redefine American culture by learning how other peoples answer the same problems of living. Similar to the 1920s dream of going to the city to make a fortune, the 1970s dream is to see the world and its diversity and, in so doing, to find a broader definition of oneself.

Upon returning, the traveler faces a dilemma: People ask what it was like, but do not want to listen. If one has been away too long, people at home are suspicious. Having lived a dream of many Americans, how can one explain its reality without sounding like a failure? Thomas Hornbein, author and climber on the 1963 Everest Expedition, wrote: "But at times I wondered if I had not come a long way only to find that what I really sought was something I had left behind" (1968:35).

### *Traveling as a Rite of Passage*

Seen from a symbolic perspective, youthful traveling is a ritual process. It involves a particular age group, and patterns exist for initiation, social interactions, and communion ceremonies. The membership is defined by attitude as well as dress and manner of travel. Because the membership is always changing, there are no set rites, but only categories of behavior. Viewed as a rite of passage a la Van Gennep (1960), the ritual process begins with separation from home, friends and family, and one's possessions. A three-month liminal period includes feats of great hardship and many reversals. The rites of separation continue, increasing in tension, until the moment when the decision is made to return, at which time the rites of incorporation, of returning to friends, family, and possessions, begin.

Many aspects of traveling involve cultural reversals, and, in particular, the establishment of new pollution boundaries. Under normal circumstances, these boundaries in Western societies concern cleanliness and one's body. "Cleanliness is next to Godliness" reflects the American attitude toward sanitation. For the unkempt traveler, physical appearance is irrelevant and American standards of cleanliness impossible to achieve. Furthermore, the traveler can affirm his inner goodness by maintaining a dirty exterior, an idea made clear by Douglas (1966).

If the pollution boundaries of the individual are reflected by the group, as Douglas states, then the individual avoidance of involvement is reflected by the group's insularity. Relationships with members of indigenous populations are minimal on all levels, except for that of served to server. It is especially unlikely for Westerners to be involved with non-Westerners in romantic relationships, given the stereotype among other cultures that Westerners are "loose" and immoral.

As in traditional societies, symbolic possessions are important to travelers. The most standard are a passport and a backpack. Even though very little walking is done, the image of being a self-contained unit with one's home on one's back is important. Backpacks are also symbolic of the liminal persona who is "just passing through" and with whom no relationship is to be established. Styles of dress, jewelry, and a few special vocabulary words are also symbols used by travelers in order to be identified as ritual initiates and to identify others as such. The possessions a traveler carries often have little significance at home but become highly significant while traveling. In this respect, travelers are like the American Indians who used sacred bundles of objects to endow them with special powers.

Because money can buy almost anything, because day-to-day living is without responsibilities, and because the individual is totally free to leave at any time, traveling combines the security of living at home with the adult's power of exercising ultimate control over one's decisions. The traveler is the passive recipient of the benefits of childhood and the active determiner of his or her temporal future. Thus, as a rite of passage, traveling combines elements of both childhood and adulthood.

Keniston (1965) states that youth is a time of moratorium on roles. Perhaps it is essential that the traveler has no meaningful roles, because by leaving that which is known and familiar, the traveler chooses to be "invisible." In many traditional societies, the rites of passage from childhood to adulthood involve physical removal of the ritual initiates from their own society. In addition, during this liminal period, elements of society are recombined into incongruous relationships—for instance, a man wearing the mask of a dog (Turner 1967). In traveling, anonymity is achieved as the individual is thrust together with others who know nothing of one's past or future. And incongruity reigns with the juxtaposition of Western and non-Western elements in the traveler's daily existence.

Traveling differs, however, from the rites of passage in traditional societies in that it is voluntary and self-directed. There are no elders to facilitate the proper acquisition of knowledge, nor are there any real markers to

indicate when adult status has been achieved. Nevertheless, regardless of the lack of outside direction, travelers do act in accordance with unspoken rules and seem to pass from place to place in a prescribed manner. And, since the ritual is self-motivated, perhaps the attainment of adulthood is also self-defined.

### Notes

1. Ms. Teas spent four years traveling, then returned to Nepal to undertake fieldwork in primatology and to study travelers. When Western youths learned that their life-style was Ms. Teas' object of investigation, they refused to speak to her. She therefore explained her role by the equally truthful statement that she was studying monkeys.
2. The subjects of this study were primarily English-speaking travelers, who I met in cheap restaurants in Kathmandu, Nepal.

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