

Paddling in Nepal

- Sandy Ferguson, Oct. 1991

We came down from Sarangkot, dropping a 1000 metres in the bright sun of an early morning, knees protesting as usual, down to the lake lying invitingly below. Our first priority was tickets to get us back to Kathmandu, hopefully that night. We tried the travel agents, but nothing, the road was closed, fallen down again as it so often does. I sent Maria off on a bike to try the bus companies and settled down with a book from the little second hand bookshop. A couple of hours later she returned unsuccessfully - if anyone could have got a ticket for that night's bus it would have been her. We bought tickets for the next day, went and found lodgings, something to eat and then walked to where I'd been told boats were available for hire.

If you are in the right place, they find you - money change, rickshaw, hash? This time a boat? Sixty rupees was way above what we'd been told so I told Maria we'd keep walking, down to the water to look, as the haggling went on. Finally we got a vessel until 7.00 p.m. at about 13 rupees an hour - seemed reasonable - for a tourist to pay!

The boat in question was the same as they all are, a dory if you rowed it or a flat bottomed canoe if you paddle it - or that is the terminology I'd apply. Flat bottomed, carvel planked with a very small deck fore and aft, just enough to sit on and three thwarts. If the Nepalese had progressed to rowing it would have been easy but with a barge like this I saw that it could be hard work ahead.

We pushed off and I thought back to earlier issues of *Open Canoeist Newsletters* about paddling and J strokes (remember I'm a kayaker by inclination). Destination - the other side of the lake, a bit over a kilometre away with me steadily powering away and Maria waving her paddle at the water. We sighted a little bay and headed in, pulling the boat on to the beach. Another canoe came in and the boys disappeared into the bushes before paddling away. Seclusion, what we needed - we stripped off and soaped off the 10 days of grime as well as our clothes in the slightly green water.

Clothes and bodies scrubbed, it started to gently rain so we paddled round the point into the next bay where there was a tea house we'd been told about - the best pancakes in Nepal? We'd try them and the inevitable cup or two of tea. Another boat paddled in and an English couple joined us, I'd met them on my way out through Helambu towards the end of the first trek - he a mountaineer running trips into the Himalaya's easier peaks in India and Pakistan as well as other lumpy bits of the world. K2, Korokaram, Kathmandu, Tibet and Turkestan as he and Maria compared their wanderings.

The rain eased, the broken gutters survived another day and we picked up our paddles, pushed off and paddled west.

"I'd like to go to the end of the lake." alright for her to say this - it was going to be me who'd achieve it on a pancake and a cup of tea, driving a foul bottomed barge. Fortunately the lake was calm, the rain had given up in our area for the day and if I'd not had practise before I'd get it today. The grey-green hills slowly passing as we headed for the far end where the Harpan Kholi runs through the rice fields to the Phewa Tal, the lake we were paddling.

It was about 5.30 p.m. by the time we reached the reeds and mud banks and the agitated waving from some fishermen as we manoeuvred passed their nets. I'd had enough, this was as far as we should go, time to turn, head back to Pokhara and a meal, especially as the clouds were building up over the town. It looked like someone was going to get wet and I hoped it wasn't us. It gets dark by 6.00 p.m. and the few flashes of lightning to the east of the town didn't improve my mood as I tried to keep the strokes regular and accurate - pull and twist, pull and twist.

The lights came on in the town as the lake got darker - this would be a test of navigation, returning to an unknown shore, no map, no GPS, no watch (we guessed the time) and a boat that seemed to get heavier as we went. As all things must we eventually reached the jetty I'd thought I was aiming for, guessing at the outline of the town, turned right through a line of buoys (didn't mean to do that) and hugged the shoreline looking for an anchored 420 (yacht) to appear. It did and we were home, all we had to do was tie up, collect our gear and try to find the owner. Easy as the path to the town passed his house (shack) and he was about to go down to the lake to see if the crazy tourists had survived. Of course they had, my years/generations of seamanship and sailors, I couldn't let them down?

And so to the next most important thing of the day - food, we'd eat at Hari's little open air restaurant again tonight.