

# Down and Out in Kathmandu

*adventures in backpacking*

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Down and Out in Kathmandu: adventures in backpacking

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## CHAPTER ONE

Compact soldiers fidgeted with their machine guns as the newest arrivals entered the airport. Zelda joined the visa queue and took out a paperback. As the long line nudged forward, she noticed that the owner of the backpack behind her seemed to have disappeared. Begrudgingly she dragged the lonely luggage forward with her own. The stocky, dread-locked man soon returned, apparently not noticing his bag had moved.

"You should really be more careful," she said.

"Pardon?"

"You should really watch out more, you know, be more careful. There are probably pickpockets and thieves all over the place just waiting for a chance to grab your bag."

"What?"

"Your backpack! If you haven't noticed it's pretty chaotic in here and I can't be held responsible if anything happens, so you should watch out for your own stuff. I could have stolen from you twice now and you never would have noticed!"

"You can do what you like but it's not bloody likely that you'd get too far, in case you hadn't notice those blokes with Uzi's," he replied, gesturing towards the armed men dotted around the hall. "Besides, I don't recall asking you to watch my bag."

Kicking herself again for not getting her visa ahead of time and now starting off so badly with the ruggedly attractive stranger behind her, Zelda took a deep breath and began again. "I noticed you getting on in Bangkok, where did you connect from?"

The man let out a deep sigh, followed by a long stretch and a yawn. "Australia. Man, what I wouldn't give to be on a sandy beach smoking a joint right about now." He started into upper-body twists, his springy dread-locks danced around his bronze face. "Say, do you know how much the visa is gonna cost?"

"Twenty-five dollars for one month."

"American dollars?"

“Uh, yeah,” replied Zelda sarcastically, not realizing Australians used dollars too.

“Oh. Don’t suppose customs take traveler’s cheques, do they?”

“No, but there’s a currency exchange right back there that I’m sure would be happy to help you – in case you didn’t notice in your earlier wanderings.”

“Fantastic! Would you mind watching my bag just once more? Cheers...” He was already walking towards the booth, digging a passport and traveler’s cheques out of his money belt.

“What a jerk,” Zelda mumbled. Unable to concentrate on the book in her hand, she glanced around the crowded arrivals hall, purposefully avoiding setting her eyes on the man’s bag. It seemed like every available surface was covered with paintings or carvings of fierce-looking demons and other strange creatures she only vaguely recognized from her guidebooks. She knew she should be excited to finally see these things in real life, but her fascination was outweighed by her overwhelming sense of fatigue. All she wanted to do was to get to her hotel room and lay down on a real bed. The weather certainly didn’t help her mood. Nepal was a heck of a lot warmer than she thought it would be, and the airport didn’t seem to be air-conditioned. After pulling her long brown hair into a ponytail with a scrunchie, Zelda carefully wiped the sweat off her face and black-framed glasses with a Kleenex.

A few feet later, the bubbly blonde stranger returned. “Cheers for that! You’re a sport. Do you need to change money yourself? I’ll watch your rucksack for ya...”

“Thanks, but no. I’ve got everything under control.” Zelda twisted back to face the slowly shortening queue. She pulled out her wallet anyway and silently counted her cash. It wouldn’t hurt to get more rupees while she had the chance, she thought. The exchange rates here had to be better than at Seattle-Tacoma International airport. A few moments later she turned to face the stranger again. “Actually, I would like to get some more money, since this line isn’t really moving very fast. If you don’t mind?”

“No, not at all. I’ll be here!”

Zelda sprinted to the currency exchange, changing greenbacks for rupees in record time. Racing back, she was relieved to see her bags still safely in line and seemingly unmolested. Sure, there were armed guards everywhere, she thought, but those bags were filled with gifts for the families she’d be staying with and she didn’t know that guy from Adam. Zelda muttered a “thanks” while casually

checking the zips on her bags.

“No worries,” he replied cheerfully. “So, how long are you going to be in Nepal anyway?”

“Oh, about three months or so I think. Everything’s open-ended at the moment.” Zelda couldn’t help chuckling for the first time in days. After thirty-two hours of flights, bad food and long layover’s, she was actually in Kathmandu, well, at least technically. She could feel a smile spreading across her face. The months of preparations – sub-letting her apartment, quitting her job as a computer programmer, getting several rounds of vaccinations, and arranging all the tickets – finally seemed worth it. Everything was going as planned and soon, very soon, she would begin her own amazing adventure. She was sure of it. Somehow the delays at the airport didn’t count.

The man behind her slammed one hand into his forehead and thrust the other towards her chest. “Where are my manners? G’day, the name’s Ian.”

“Hi, I’m Zelda, my name is Zelda,” she said, her own hand extending automatically to grip Ian’s right palm.

“Goodtameetcha. This is my first time abroad, at least by myself,” Ian confided. “I’m planning on traveling around the world – so long as my money lasts anyway,” he announced with a big wink and a grin.

Before they could continue, Zelda noticed the armed guards were motioning for her to move. “Oh, it’s my turn! Good luck Ian!” she sang, whilst throwing on her biggest smile for the customs officer and two soldiers flanking his sides. A few flurries of his brown wrist and she was charging downstairs towards baggage claim.

“Where the hell are my bags?” Zelda demanded from no one in particular. Even though she had spent the last forty minutes crossing the arrivals hall inches at a time, the luggage from her plane had still not been unloaded. Other western tourists who had smugly breezed through the visa holders’ control point, now sat slouched and folded in frustrated heaps along the rusty conveyor belt. Zelda took a seat and began waiting semi-patiently, tapping her foot on the bare concrete floor. In America she never had to wait for luggage.

A few minutes later, Ian bounced into view. His face was split open by a set of teeth that would make an oyster envious. “Beauty ain’t it?” Smiling at his passport’s freshly violated pages, he didn’t seem to notice Zelda rolling her eyes.

The conveyor belt grumbled to life. A large group of well-equipped Asian tourists – cameras at the ready – shuffled forward *en masse* and retrieved their

matching bags, before re-assembling around a plump woman furiously waving a pennant-on-a-stick. The two frosty pieces of glass marked 'Exit' slid open. On the other side, a squirming mass of human bodies convulsed towards the pack of fresh arrivals. Shouting men in long tunics waving signs announcing hotels, tours and guides, competed with each other for lucrative tourist dollars. Thin barricades and more armed guards lined both sides of the exit. The doors slid shut before the crowd's screams could register as anything other than primal.

Zelda's eyes felt as if they were going to pop out of her head. Never in her life did she miss Seattle as much as she did right at that second.

An over-stuffed blue backpack, jerking towards her on the convey belt, snapped Zelda back to reality. She rose, grabbed her heavy bag and at last returned her attention to Ian.

"Sorry?"

"How exactly do you get to the tourist district from here anyway? Do ya reckon there's a bus?"

"You mean Thamel, right? That's where most of the backpackers head to, according to my guidebook. I know you can take a taxi. I'm not sure if there's a bus or where you'd catch it. I don't think you can walk there from here though. I have my travel guide in here somewhere, if you want to take a look?"

Ian refused her offer with a wave and a grunt. "How are you getting into the city?"

"I have a ride waiting for me." Zelda's words reverberated in her head. She wouldn't have to fight with *that* crowd for transport or shelter. Immediate relief swept over her, amplified by the sight of her second piece of baggage – seventy-two pounds of donated schoolbooks – heaving towards them on the visibly straining conveyor belt.

"How's that? You have a ride waiting for you? How do you reckon?"

"I'm here to volunteer. The director is picking me up and taking me to my hotel. That's why I know I have a ride." Zelda looked around the hall, noticing that while they were talking everyone – save a few concerned-looking souls – had emptied out of the baggage claim area. "Speaking of which, I really should go out and find him. Almost everyone from our plane has left already. I don't want Ganesh to think I missed my flight!"

"Bloody hell! Did someone steal my rucksack?" Ian swore under his breath as he followed her gaze around the empty hall. "Listen, I'm sure your friends are used to the airline being delayed. Do you reckon you can wait around a few

more minutes?" Before she could answer, Ian darted over to the lone Royal Nepal Airlines representative, already surrounded by a small mob of angry, well-dressed Europeans. Momentarily interrupting their heated conversation, Ian asked, "Sorry, whom do I ask about lost luggage?" The uniformed man pointed tiredly at himself. Ian raced back towards Zelda.

"I reckon I'll be a while. I have to see that bloke about my bags. Where are you staying?" Ian asked distractedly, watching for any escape attempts from the airline's representative.

"The Royal Guesthouse...or Hotel, something like that. It's supposed to be just outside Thamel proper. I have the address in here somewhere if you want it, but I really need to get going."

"Right. Don't worry about the address. If you can wait outside for me that would be bloody brilliant, otherwise I'm sure the taxi driver will know where it's at. See you soon then!" He was already trotting back to the small Nepalese man and foreigners, now swearing in French.

Zelda shrugged the books and backpacks onto her shoulders and arms. Once balanced she moved slowly towards the exit. As the doors slid open, her nasal cavities were assaulted by a wave of feces, unknown spices and body odor. Piercing, unintelligible screams echoed off the high concrete roof. The kaleidoscope of colors, languages and noises overwhelmed her. As the doors to the airport closed swiftly behind her, Zelda repressed an intense urge to jump back through and declare this experiment a huge mistake.

She pushed her way through the seething crowd, exiting onto the open parking lot unharmed but sweatier for the experience. Wiping her forehead off with the back of her hand, Zelda squinting against the unrelenting afternoon sun and took her first real look at the scenery around her. Blinding light reflected off tin-roof shacks. Swirling brown earth thickened the already heavy, humid air. It looked as if the city center was far off in the distance. Where were the snow-capped peaks and serene monasteries? Why was it so fucking hot, weren't they at the top of the world? She wasn't sure what she should do next; Ian was already a memory. The chaos she had just witnessed wasn't part of the plan. Zelda assumed that when she got off the plane someone from the volunteer program would be patiently waiting for her at the gate.

Rifling through her daypack for her program coordinator's phone number, she did not notice the well-dressed man rapidly approaching her.

"Excuse me, Miss Zelda Marie Richardson?"

His welcoming grin and moisture-free appearance affected Zelda more than him knowing her name. “Mr. Ganesh Pundam, I presume,” she exclaimed, “I am so pleased to meet you!” She shook his hand fervently, melting with relief. No wonder he’d wanted passport photographs *before* she’d arrived!

“I am pleased to meet you also! Tell me, did you not see the sign?” he asked, gesturing behind him towards a young boy sitting on the hood of an old taxi, holding an enormous sign stating her full name.

“Sorry, I didn’t see it. I guess I was a bit overwhelmed by all the people,” she replied sheepishly. Zelda certainly hadn’t expected Ganesh to be waiting for her in the parking lot.

“Yes, yes. It is not a problem. Please, to come with me.” The large grin was back in force. Attempting to be gentlemanly, Ganesh nearly dislocated his shoulder when he lifted Zelda’s box of books. “Oh my gods! May I inquire, what is inside this?” he rasped, carefully setting her oversized luggage into the undersized trunk.

“Books.” Zelda replied, beaming. “Donated by a few elementary schools in my old neighborhood for my school’s library. My school here in Nepal, I mean.”

Ganesh looked up at her – clearly astonished – but said nothing, only wrestled further with the trunk, finally using a piece of rope to tie it closed.

A few minutes and strained muscles later, Ganesh hopped onto his bright red motorcycle, promising to meet them back at the hotel. The shy young boy – “my cousin” Ganesh reassured – would guide the taxi to the hotel. As soon as his uncle sputtered off, the boy jumped into the front left-hand seat, ready to follow. Zelda was about to protest – there’s no way he could have been more than ten years old – before realizing that the steering wheel was on the other side of the car. Hugging her backpack, she braced herself for the drive to Thamel, wondering what else was going to be backwards here.

Zelda didn’t know if the manufacturer of the tiny automobile she was jammed into intended the car to be driven so quickly over the incredibly narrow and potholed streets. Insane motorcyclists, belching buses, three-wheeled breadboxes, kamikaze bicycles and brightly-dressed women competed with her cab for room. Whenever she dared to look ahead, another vehicle would be hurtling towards them, darting back into place at the very last moment. Zelda didn’t like being part of this constant game of chicken, but figured she would be worse off walking than riding. At least the car would absorb some of the impact.

Approaching a major intersection, Zelda saw a flustered policeman perched

atop a raised cement circle, angrily motioning traffic into the city center. Thankfully the drivers heeded his whistles and waves. So far Zelda couldn't remember any part of the road being straight, their cab was continually winding around ornate squares, pools of water and colorfully decorated temples.

It was so exotically different Zelda was having trouble processing it. She tried her best to relax and enjoy the scenery, but her body seemed to be shutting down. Her head started to droop as they approached a heavily guarded building, towering high above the thick stone wall protecting it. She was trying to figure out if the Royal Palace was supposed to look like a series of melting snow cones, when she crashed out on her backpack.

*Rap, rap, rap.* "Miss Zelda? Excuse me, please to get out now?" Ganesh was peering into the backseat. Her box of books and daypack already sat on the hotel's steps. Wiping the drool off her hand, she stepped out of the cab and into a quiet, tree-filled courtyard. Only the chirping of birds and whisks of brooms filled the air.

"Come, come. This way." Ganesh said, encouraging her with a wave of his hand to get out of the cab.

She followed her program coordinator and his cousin into the guesthouse. The group climbed three flights of stairs before the hotel owner produced a key the size of his forearm and jiggled the creaky lock open. He motioned for the tall foreigner to enter her temporary chambers. Zelda was pleasantly surprised by the large mustard-colored room and two single beds. A vase filled with flowers stood on a small writing table, filling the room with a glorious scent. The four of them dragged her luggage inside before returning to the hallway for a brief round of goodbyes.

"I will return in three days' time! We will have tea in the garden and talk more about the program. Then you will meet your first family!" exclaimed Ganesh.

"Fantastic! How many volunteers are there in total? Is anyone else here already?" Zelda asked.

"There are only four of you. It is a small group this time, better for you. One volunteer arrives tomorrow and another a few hours before we meet again. The fourth is an American lady – like you – staying two rooms down," he said gesturing towards the end of the brightly-lit hallway. "But she is not here now. I made a program for her to go to Dhulikhel. She will return in two days' time! Would you also like to see Dhulikhel before beginning the volunteer program? It is not difficult to arrange."

“Thank you but I want to explore Kathmandu before we begin. I won’t be volunteering in the city, right?” Zelda replied, not really sure what or where Dhulikhel was.

“That is not a problem. The American lady did not like Kathmandu, but she arrived one week ago. Perhaps she had too much time to explore on her own,” said Ganesh, laughing. Zelda didn’t get the joke. Before she could push him for details, he continued. “Tomorrow there is a transportation strike; none of the taxis or tempos will be working. It is of utmost importance that you take caution when you go out in the city. Perhaps you should only walk around the city center? Durbar Square is quite beautiful, there are many temples for you to see there,” he offered.

“Oh, okay.” Zelda replied slowly, processing his words. “Wait, the taxi drivers aren’t mad at foreigners, are they? How is the other volunteer going to get to the hotel then?”

“No, no. Foreigners are not the issue. I will meet the lady from New Zealand at the airport and bring her back here on my motorbike. It will be great! It is not a problem!” said Ganesh. Clapping his hands together with a loud crack, the small group snapped to attention for his final words. “So Zelda, we will leave you now to rest. Enjoy Kathmandu! Welcome to the Kingdom of Nepal!” With a deep bow and palms pressed together, Ganesh bid her the first of many dramatic farewells, taking his shy cousin and the hotel owner down the stairs with him.

Zelda closed the door and twisted the deadbolt. Lying down on one of the feather beds, she closed her eyes and within seconds was fast asleep.