



john harris

Peak experience

High above the Pacific Ocean somewhere six Eugeneans are right now enroute to a "lifetime peak experience."

Bruce Mason, one of the coordinators of the Outdoor Program; Susan Phillips, a doctoral student in psychology; Julia Hass-Nelson, a Eugene school teacher, and recent Oregon graduates Jim Draeger, Mark Reed and Adam Kerner are off on a three month trip to the mountains of Nepal, a kingdom located between India and China.

The official name of the venture is the "Himalayan Photographic Expedition," but that's simply a titular explanation. "All of us are interested in mountain environments, mountain people and climbing," explains Mason. "For a lot of us photography is one of the major goals of the trip, but it's also the opportunity to be in a non-mechanized civilization for a long period of time. The wheel isn't even used in Nepal; everything is carried. It's just a real desire to experience that culture and its pace."

The group left Wednesday morning from Portland International Airport and will arrive in Katmandu, the capital of Nepal and the one place in the country where the wheel is, indeed, used, on Friday morning after spending 35 hours in the air. They will stay in Katmandu for five days, procuring supplies and being acclimated to Nepal's weather, and then will begin a two week trek to the Mt. Everest region. Everest is the highest mountain in the world, over 29,000 feet high, and is the land of the Yeti, the Asian bigfoot.

It is also rabies country; the disease is spread by huge feral dogs that roam the region. The Eugene group underwent a series of 12 injections before they left, though, so they hope to be immune to not only rabies, but yellow fever, diphtheria and a multitude of other diseases endemic to Nepal. As a further prevention against rabies, Reed included among his supplies a tear gas canister with which to ward off unfriendly dogs.

The party will trek through villages as high as 13,000 feet which are inhabited by Sherpas, refugees from China who settled in the area and who will take care of the logistics of trip for the six adventurers. At 17,000 feet they will establish a basecamp from which they will embark upon mountain climbing and glacier expeditions.

After four weeks on Everest the group will return to Katmandu, where they will replenish their exhausted supplies and selves, and then they will trek to Western Nepal to the Annapurna Mountain range for more climbing and picture taking.

Each of the six is taking at least 50 rolls of color film, and Mason is taking 80 rolls and \$1,200 in photographic equipment. It is well worth the effort since Nepal includes 10 of the 11 highest mountains in the world and has 600 peaks over 20,000 feet high.

"It's just a stupendous mountain environment," says Mason. "There's no place like it in the world I know of."

Because of the incredible scenery, Nepal is rapidly becoming a favorite tourist spot for both private and commercial expeditions. Many of the commercial outfitters take along hundreds of porters and guides and can subsequently pack in large amounts of supplies, much of which often remains as garbage once the expedition leaves. In addition, the groups use the existing trees for fire wood and are slowly but surely stripping Nepal of much of its important timber land. Without these trees erosion occurs, and soon many of the streams may become filled with silt and cause flooding down below.

Many of the Nepalese are unaware of what is happening, according to Mason, and so another goal of the trip will be to inform the natives of the danger of land abuse.

"Instead of just using their country for our own purposes, we hope to help by spreading the word about deforestation and carrying out garbage," Mason tells.

Weather permitting and barring serious injury or illness, the group will remain in Nepal until the first of next year, subsisting on their own supplies and the help of just a handful of porters. And to Mason and the rest, doing the trip on their own is as important as doing it at all. "Anyone can damn near do it. You don't have to be rich, skilled or pay someone else to do it for you," Mason claims. "What we're doing is getting to be a rare thing, and I find that really rewarding personally."

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