

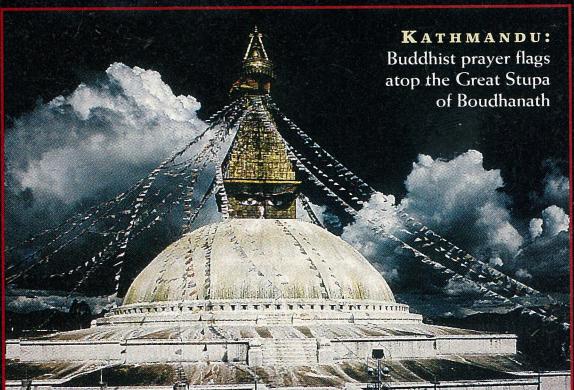
Last Tango in KATHMANDU

REVISITING AN OLD FRIEND, A FORMER HOME, AND THE LIFE YOU LEFT BEHIND ALWAYS ADDS UP TO MORE THAN YOU IMAGINED

BY WILLIAM MCGOWAN

MY OLD FRIEND IAN BAKER and I had made detailed plans to meet just outside customs at the Kathmandu airport. It had been a long time since my last visit to the city, and I didn't like the idea of tracking down his new house

in a place that had shed its skin over and over again in the 20 years since I had lived there. I wouldn't have blamed him if he hadn't shown up; waiting out the flight's four-hour delay was a lot to ask of anyone, much less a restless character who had gained worldwide acclaim for his discovery of the Hidden Falls of the Tsangpo Gorge, in a remote corner of Tibet. The thought of Baker killing time in an airport reminded me of an incident when he was waiting for a flight in Chengdu, China, on the way back from Tibet. Stuck in a passenger



KATHMANDU:
Buddhist prayer flags
atop the Great Stupa
of Boudhanath

PHOTOGRAPHS BY *Nancy Jo Johnson*



LOCAL COLOR: Maura Moynihan, cultural refugee and bon-vivant, Dutch Bob hosts the city's unofficial expat watering hole.

enclosure surrounded by a high fence, he had simply climbed outside, almost provoking the soldiers on security detail into shooting him.

In fact, if he hadn't been there, I might have been half-amused. Having lived in Kathmandu for most of the nearly 20 years that I had been away from it, Baker knew the city better than most. I could imagine him playing out a scene reminiscent of *The Third Man*, watching me from the shadows as I picked my way through the bazaars and temples looking for him, like Holly Martins searching for his old college chum Harry Lime in the sewers and back alleys of postwar Vienna.

A no-show by Baker might also have solved the problem of Asha and Monsoon, the two "delightful trollops" who, he had promised in an e-mail, were "the best cure for jet lag" to be found. I was sure, however, that this trollop business was more than a matter of reviving an old friend's energies after a 30-hour flight. I was on the verge of getting engaged back home in New York City, and Baker, impish as always, was ready to throw some tests my way, just to remind me of what would soon be forsaken.

But he was there after all, loyal friend and steady guide. At six foot two and more than 200 pounds, his frame loomed large, and although he often had a detached, ethereal manner — the fruit, I imagined, of years spent in rigorous meditation — his body language that night exuded street smarts. Seeing him again made me realize that every time we had met up in New York during the past few years, he had always looked younger than before.

As our cab picked its way along ravaged roads that had been in much better shape 20 years earlier, Baker explained that there was some politi-

cal protest scheduled for the following day that would make transport for the girls difficult. Asha and Monsoon would have to wait, he apologized. Twenty minutes later, we swung open a heavy steel gate, climbed up an outside staircase to the second floor, and were inside his pleasure dome, a triplex pad that would have gone for at least a million had it been on Park Avenue and was worth a pasha's purse even in raggedy old Kathmandu.

Like almost every residence Baker had inhabited since I had first known him, the house was a cross between a monastery and a brothel, decorated with an abundance of ritual daggers, tiger skins, and leopard heads. There were rare Hindu wood carvings and Buddhist statuary, in forms both pious and kinky. And all over the house, in almost every room, hung enough red curtains to fill a New Orleans cathouse. I made a comment about the monastery/brothel motif, which launched Baker on a grandiose Buddhist rap about the problem of my manufacturing a contradiction like this. Baker has always had a way of speaking in perfectly sculpted sentences, like some affected Victorian gentleman channeling a long-dead Hindu sage. Some find this pretentious, but I have always found it entertaining. For me, it is yet another reminder that Baker is a character from another century, appropriately living in a country that is itself stuck fast in another century. "Welcome to my life," he said with a grin, perhaps acknowledging an awareness of just how pompous his remarks could sometimes sound.



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BAKER: The costume matches the persona — that of an explorer from another century.

I was at that quiet but treacherous point in early middle age where a man becomes obsessed with what might have been. I wondered what kind of parallel existence could be hovering out there in the ether, reflecting other choices and other paths. My first sojourn in Kathmandu had been a formative experience, initiating me into a life of adventure, experience, and travel. And Baker had been a constant source of inspiration — and, often, exasperation — someone whose own life I had shared with relish from afar, since it appeared to be getting wilder even as my own was mellowing.

It seemed a good time to go. About a year before I arrived, Baker had made a very important discovery in a very unusual manner. With the encouragement and inspiration of some of Tibetan Buddhism's most eminent spiritual masters, including the Dalai Lama, he had used a set of ancient, secretly coded Tibetan Buddhist texts to locate what the media had dubbed "the Lost Waterfall of Shangri-La." It made Baker the object both of international publicity and, when rivals jealous of his achievement questioned the legitimacy of his claim, of international controversy. Baker eventually beat back these attacks, however. He had just settled into writing a highly anticipated book about the adventure — and had struck a deal with publishers for at least half a million dollars' worth of advances.

TH E K A T H M A N D U I had known was a walker's paradise, more like a sprawling medieval village than a city. A stroll through town showed that some of the old magic was still there. It was the autumn festival season; the previous week, drunken celebrants had pulled chariots through the city's narrow streets; in the coming days, herds of water buffalo and goats would be sacrificed, slathering the same streets in blood. Even so, the sense of magic was short-lived. Thousands of new cars, motorcycles, and buses have combined to make the city one of the

The Kathmandu I had known had also been a place of great parties: "full moon parties" when the city glowed like phosphorus and legions of monkeys roamed the silvered hillsides, and "monsoon parties" marking the advent of the season in which daily downpours turned the landscape an otherworldly, iridescent green, and the night sky sizzled with lightning bolts.

Baker threw a housewarming party a few days after my arrival. Almost every long-term Western resident in town was invited, along with a healthy complement of locals. Although many of the expats now lived well, they were not there solely for the neocolonial creature comforts. Most were there for what Baker called "the primacy of experience" — to enrich their lives by immersing themselves in a totally different and often strange culture.

By 10 p.m., the house was full, with groups gathering in different clusters as Baker shuttled back and forth between them. On the couch in the living room sat Dutch Bob. Now around 60, Dutch Bob kept an open house that functioned as the unofficial watering hole of the expat community, the Rick's Café of Kathmandu.

Next to Dutch Bob was Maura Moynihan, the daughter of Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York. Having first lived in India at the age of 15, when her father was appointed the American ambassador to that country, she knew Kathmandu well, and she had moved there when life in the United States became, as she put it, "psychologically intolerable." Endearingly nutty, Moynihan had everyone in hysterical laughter with her party monologues describing disingenuous Indian bureaucrats and clueless mountaineering icons who had tried to pick her up in tourist bars.

Nearby were two Germans known as the Dancing Andreases. One had left a monastic center in the Himalayas after 12 years to start a tradition known as "Tango Night." The other was an accomplished tango instructor who had come for a working visit at the invitation of the first Andreas and ended up staying on.

Part Merlin, part Merry Prankster, in college Baker was at the center of a bohemian fringe that fused intellectual curiosity with a bacchanalian party spirit.

most polluted in Asia. Where once mountains were visible in the background, there is now a fog of carbon monoxide that leaves your lungs feeling as if they've smoked several packs of cigarettes. The rush to modernize, the adventure-travel boom, and the possible criminal misuse of foreign aid have made a mess without any real development. Buildings are taller, cutting off the light. Roads are less stable. Sewers still flow freely in the streets, the smell of human waste sharp in the nose. Structures lean into decay, coated with lime-green mold. Just outside of town, huge villas line once-bare hillsides, piles of garbage smoldering next to their formidable walls.

Sensing my disappointment, Baker told me that it was wrong to see the city as some kind of Buddhist never-never land. It was all about the union of opposites, and the growth that takes place in that union. "Here, nothing runs unmixed," he said, sidestepping a dead dog that lay in the street as passersby sprinkled it with marigold petals. "The world cannot be separated into the sacred and the profane, or the beauty and the horror. They are all part of the same *mysterium tremendum*, and all we can do is stand and behold it."

The conversation that night was wide-ranging, and I moved through passionate discussions about obscure Himalayan tribes and arcane points of Tibetan Buddhist doctrine as if they were a form of luxurious liberation from the usual New York party prattle. Later, when I told Baker about this, he smiled. "It's all about catching other people's fevers," he said.

Throughout the years I have known Baker, starting in college, a cultivated, other-century air has been his most consistent characteristic. Part Merlin, part Merry Prankster, he was at the center of a bohemian fringe that fused intellectual curiosity with a bacchanalian party spirit. For one of his birthdays, he threw a "Mad Mushroom Tea Party" along the lines of the gathering in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. In his last year at school, he organized a pagan festival in the woods to celebrate a host of premodern pleasures of the flesh. The three-day affair even featured a live-animal sacrifice.

I was a loyal and much-entertained follower, providing Baker with an audience and, I began to feel, at least a measure of the moral ballast he

sometimes seemed to lack. I tried to ground him and to check his recklessness, which was often hard to restrain.

"You can't buy that car; it has a cracked axle," I remember telling him when I heard he was about to buy a stylish but battered old Volvo that was listing to one side. "One cracked axle, what's the big deal?" he shrugged. "Only one cracked axle. The other one is fine."

During his junior year, Baker spent a semester abroad in Nepal. Living in peasant villages and hiking into recently opened sections of the Himalayas, tripping over second-century Buddhas sprouting through the worn pavement, was an experience that made him feel connected in some way to a kind of past life. "Everything seemed open," Baker recalls. "Everything seemed possible. The world, all of a sudden, seemed so much larger than I had ever dreamed it could be."

Baker had vowed to return to Nepal after graduation. But before he could get there, he had a near-fatal fall on Satan, an infamous Norwegian climbing route. Doctors told him he would never climb again. A long recuperation — and depression — followed.

TA KING BAKER'S LEAD, I had gone to Kathmandu. As he had, I found it to be a city of utter wonder, a place of sensual immediacy and lush, transporting power, with mystical prospects hanging just out of reach. And as it had transformed Baker, spending time there changed me profoundly.

Although the area had been flooded with hippies since the mid-'60s, it was still remarkably authentic. Westerners were welcomed and appreciated for living like their Nepali hosts, many in mud-floored huts on hillsides lined with rice paddies. The obscene levels of poverty, along with the subtle spiritual traditions that had developed in the face of this, communicated

month. It didn't matter that he had no roof over his head, he insisted. He would make sure I had one. I felt like one of those many-armed Hindu statues, juggling a ball in each hand and having a hard time keeping up. Stoned and overwhelmed, I stumbled outside just in time to see a flash of lightning riding the serrated silhouette of the mountains like an electric serpent. It lasted only a moment or two, but it was a powerful experience that somehow, in a totally ineffable way, seemed to change me forever.

A frame-racking case of dysentery taught me another lesson, one that many other visitors to Kathmandu learn: It's a place that's not very good for your health. But after Baker arrived back there in the early '80s, he flourished. If Kathmandu was a city that thrived on contradictions, so did the life he made there. It seemed to unite high spirituality, serious scholarship, noteworthy adventure, and an array of worldly enjoyments.

Fluent in Nepalese and Tibetan, Baker has been, variously, the resident academic director of a college semester-abroad program, a dealer in art and antiques, a trekking guide, a translator, a writer, and an explorer. Almost immediately upon returning, he resumed serious Tibetan Buddhist practice and scholarship, which brought him into the rarefied orbits of some of that tradition's greatest adepts. Looking beyond more moderate Buddhist approaches, he gravitated to the tantric philosophy. Embracing a path that has been likened to "licking honey off the razor's edge," Baker took to heart the tantric precept of using all aspects of experience — even those at the farthest, strangest reaches of life's dark and dangerous side — as a vehicle for enlightenment. Baker also took interest in tantra's celebration of what he calls "erotic mysticism," and, with the assistance of lithe yoginis, engaged in rites devised by ancient practitioners.

Equally fascinating was Kathmandu's expatriate community, filled with

True liberation requires an equal awareness of vice and virtue, Baker maintained.

"Enlightenment isn't always discovered in the light," he said. "It is often discovered in the shadows."

a way of life that was at once intensely vulnerable and intensely valuable.

I had set up camp in Swayambhu, a settlement on the outskirts of Kathmandu where people — many of whom seemed to have been out just a little too long in the noonday sun — went to hide from the Nepali visa authorities. It was also the site of one of Buddhism's holiest shrines, a stupa crowning a high hill. Pilgrims from all over the Buddhist world visited it, watching radiant sunrises and sunsets from its parapets.

It had been in Swayambhu that the world seemed to open and blow a fast kiss my way. It was in June of 1980, just before the monsoon, and the air was prickly with anticipation of the rains to come. As the candlelight flickered in a tea shop near my lodging, I was alternately tutoring a couple of kids in English, smoking hashish with a German porno actress who lived down the block, and trying to write down the address — or, rather, the coordinates — of a humpbacked dwarf from Calcutta who had invited me to stay with him when I left Kathmandu later in the

colorful characters with names like Eight-Fingered Eddy, Peanut Butter Harry, and Sadhu George. The Rock-and-Roll Raj, as they called themselves in their heyday, consisted mainly of aging hippies, renegade anthropologists, restless foreign-service spouses, art dealers, spiritual seekers, and self-styled scholars. What drove the expats of Kathmandu — unlike their expat counterparts in Saigon, Jakarta, or Hong Kong — was less financial than cultural, Baker maintained.

For these people, experience reigned supreme, and everything else — middle-class rectitude, family obligations — took a back seat. Baker referred to them as a group of people "in a city with its own internal rules and values — an exotic community that has often devoted itself to arcane experience, beyond conventional mores." *Normal* was not a word that could be used in reference to the people he knew in Kathmandu, Baker informed me. They were all, he said with evident glee, "way beyond normal."

Kathmandu during the '80s was a rollicking, untamed place with a

Seven years earlier, Baker had received Chatral's blessing and listened attentively as he warned him about the perils, both spiritual and physical, that awaited him in the Inner Tsangpo Gorge. Pemako was, like the tantric path itself, a place of enormous potential risk and just as much potential reward — the geographical embodiment of the razor's edge.

Baker had come to Chatral through a story he had heard about a lama who had recently returned from a journey to a remote area on the Nepal-Tibet border. The area seemed to encourage meditative visions of unusual intensity.

After some effort to dissuade Baker, the lama sent him to a cave high in the mountains. There Baker sat alone and meditated for a month. Beset by vivid dream states at one point, he perceived two circling fireballs that seemed to be floating through the valley.

Baker would learn that the concept of Hidden Lands was part of an important Tibetan Buddhist tradition of "sacred geography" that was described in obscure, coded texts dating from the eighth century. Baker obtained the first of the sacred texts with the help of the Dalai Lama. He then took it back to Chatral in Nepal, who helped him decipher its arcane language.

In time, Baker began to focus his energies on Pemako, an area of southeastern Tibet revered by Buddhists. It was said that a sacred waterfall deep inside Pemako hid a doorway to a Shangri La-like realm, through which pilgrims of requisite devoutness might pass.

Pemako also fascinated less spiritually inclined Westerners. Pemako's gorge, cut by the 1,800-mile-long Tsangpo River, is said to be three times as deep as the Grand Canyon. Nineteenth-century British geographers believed that only the existence of a colossal waterfall, like Victoria Falls, at the headwaters of the Nile, would explain how the Tsangpo could drop 11,000 feet in the space of 200 miles. Frustrated by the area's murderous topography, however, many were left wondering whether the waterfall was nothing more than a religious myth.

Baker got his first taste of the Tsangpo's ferocity on an aborted whitewater-rafting expedition in 1993. Still eager to pierce the gorge's unmapped heart, Baker and Ken Storm, a Minneapolis businessman and amateur adventurer consumed with the possibility of the falls' existence, had continued on foot, guided by maps that they had photocopied out of books. The two ran out of food after losing their way completely and survived only by using climbing ropes to snare wild takin — rare, ox-like creatures with climbing abilities that rival those of mountain goats. After several desperate days, they chanced upon two native hunters, who led them out.

Despite the rebuff, Baker quietly kept faith. He made seven more

trips into the gorge, some with Storm and others with Hamid Sardar, a Harvard Tibetologist. While the sacred texts were hardly topographical guides, their copious references to landmarks, including a great falls, "seemed too specific to be mere guesswork," Baker believed.

The trips were hair-raising: three-week treks across terrain that ranged from monstrously steep, scree-covered slopes to mossy ravines filled with poisonous pit vipers and massive leeches. Their path was choked with trees and plants with stinging leaves that inflicted boils, hives, and rashes on anyone who brushed against them. The final leg of the journey was nearly impassable. It took five days to cover the last 10 miles, much of it along bamboo-choked 45-degree terrain that dropped off into solid rock cliffs that plummeted into a raging river.

Equally formidable were the descendants of headhunters living just above the gorge. As Chatral had warned Baker, the Monpa tribespeople were legendary for their belief that if they could poison a traveler to death, they would inherit the victim's good luck.

On Baker's initial forays into the area, the Monpa told him that they were unaware of any such waterfall, and that there were no routes into the deepest sections of the gorge. On a later trip, however, Baker got lucky. The sky was unusually cloudless in a place where downpours sometimes occurred for a month straight. The tribespeople decided that the guardian deities of the Tsangpo were giving the go-ahead to reveal its secrets.

In fact, they said, there was a route into the Inner Gorge. And there was a waterfall, even though fear of its protector spirits discouraged them from going anywhere near it. Baker had returned year after year, more as a pilgrim than as a

Western adventurer. He spoke their language and knew their ritual practices. He had the karma, they now said, to open the Hidden Lands, and they now demanded that he go there — and take them with him.

Following their directions, Baker reached a cliff edge, where he saw an enormous waterfall, almost certainly the fabled falls. He also saw why earlier explorers had had such trouble finding it. Unless you were right in front of the waterfall, it was wholly obscured by a hairpin turn in the river, as well as by a rock spur created by two mountain ridges.

Returning in late 1998 with both the time and the proper equipment to measure the falls, Baker led another expedition into the gorge. At the end of the first week of November, he and two others roped down and made the needed calibrations. At the bottom, Baker stood in a "sunless grotto," as he describes it. Beside him, the explosive Tsangpo, whose volume was being funneled into a flume barely 60 feet wide, made it impossible to hear almost anything else. Looking at the peaks almost 20,000 feet overhead, he said "felt like being at the bottom of the earth." At the urging of the [Cont. on 149]



TANGO NIGHT: A Dancing Andreas (far right) gives a lesson.

bustling underworld seemingly given carte blanche by the government. Art piracy, gold smuggling, hashish trafficking, and other under-the-table activities were common among some expat factions. The underworld was an active arena for certain monastic communities, too, with Buddhist lamas accepting large donations from those who had approached them for blessings before certain high-risk smuggling efforts. In fact, Baker told me, the underworld was one of the few things that brought the city's many disparate elements together.

He admitted that an outsider might see a contradiction in such worldly corruption flourishing in such an outpost of spiritual aspiration. But in tantric belief, true liberation requires an equal awareness of vice and virtue, he maintained. "Enlightenment isn't always discovered in the light," he said. "It is often discovered in the shadows."

BAKER WOULD MAKE an annual or semiannual trip to New York, usually with some lama's daughter in tow or lugging some strange piece of art he might be selling or delivering to Manhattan dealers and collectors. Over a meal, he'd tell stories that for me were like the light on the dock across from Gatsby's mansion, a beacon to a world of promise and wonder. Occasionally, I'd feel a familiar tingle and think back to that last night in the pre-monsoon darkness, the lightning flashing around the rim of the valley, remembering the young man that I was, awestruck and delirious.

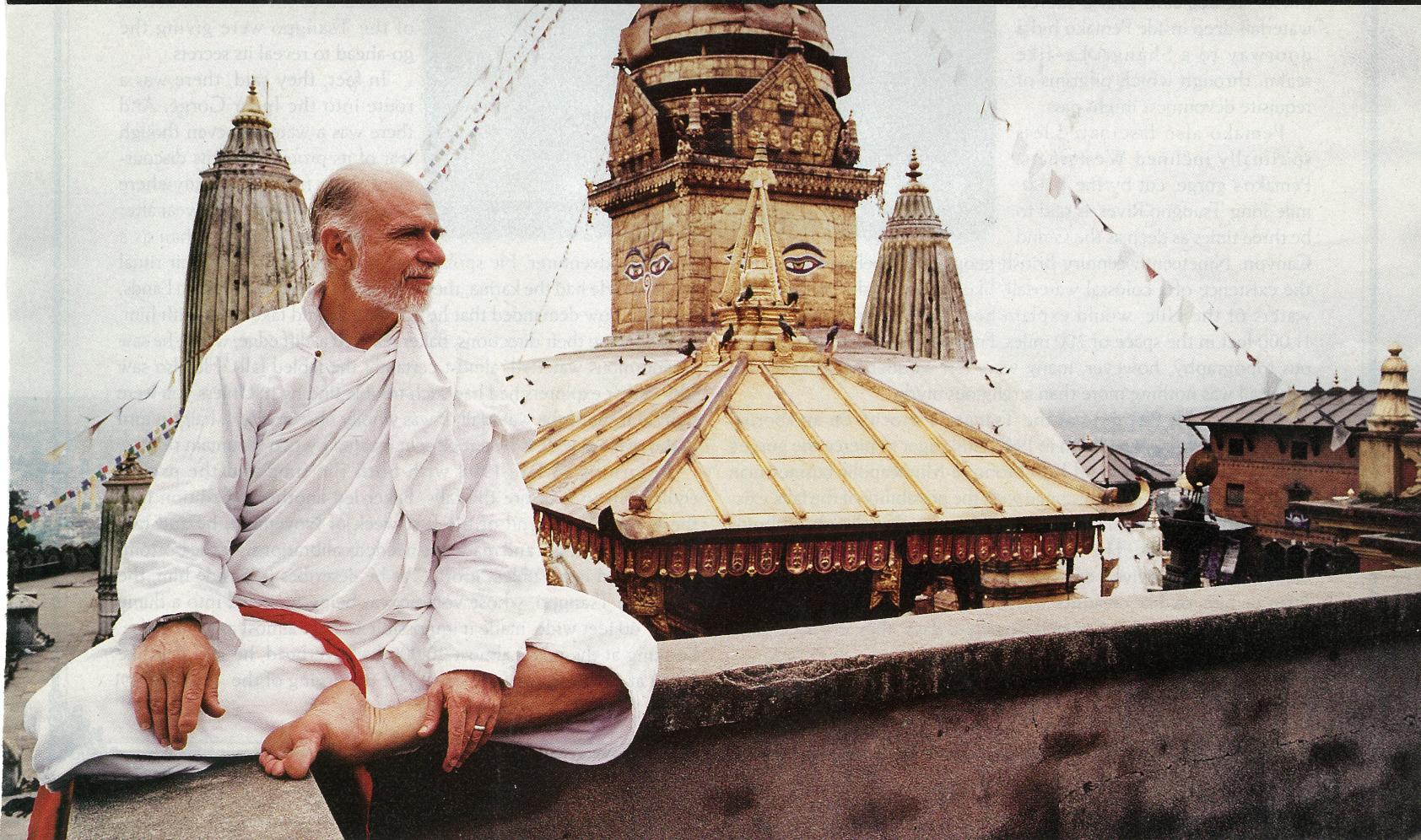
Every few years, however, I would worry about Baker and urge him to leave Kathmandu. The city had become Baker's entire world; like a member of a cult, he was often unable to connect with — or talk about — anything else. I was worried that he was becoming a colorful freak in a countercultural cliché, and that he would soon be too old to start anew anywhere else.

In fact, Baker did eventually leave, to pursue a doctoral degree at Columbia University, arranged with the assistance of the acclaimed Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman. He found the strange round of work and recreation in Manhattan diverting, but he missed Kathmandu's Byzantine swirl and left within a year. He was one of many who had tried to get away from Kathmandu only to discover that something was missing, and that everything that was missing was back in Kathmandu.

IN THE END, the world came to him. Last January, the National Geographic Society announced that Baker had led a successful expedition into the remote Tibetan region known as Pemako — "the Lotus of Great Bliss," as it is called in Tibetan. There, he had found a long-rumored major waterfall on Tibet's Tsangpo River. Clawing their way down almost-vertical 4,000-foot cliffs into a rocky gorge so deep that it remains perpetually dark and cannot be seen even on satellite surveillance photographs, Baker and another team member reached and measured a waterfall 108 feet high, then named it Hidden Falls. The discovery was hailed in Buddhist circles as a renaissance of the tradition of "Hidden Lands" that had come to the West as the myth of Shangri-La.

Over the years, Baker had told me a lot about his quest for the Hidden Lands. Chatral Sang-Gye Dorje Rinpoche, a recluse now some 90 years old, is the resident lama at a holy spot outside of Kathmandu called Godavari. It had been Chatral who had first introduced Baker to the tradition of the Hidden Lands, then guided him along the way until he found them. Baker explained that teachers like Chatral were the real reason that he and other Westerners found it so hard to leave. "There is a sense when you look at him that there is some other level of mind and reality that all the best training and education in the Western world can't even give us a glimpse of." ▶

PEANUT BUTTER HARRY: The longtime expat in his Buddhist robes, with Kathmandu's Swayambunath Stupa in the background



LAST TANGO IN KATHMANDU

Some of Baker's friends thought it was just his thirst for excitement, the dark side of the same spirit of adventure that had brought him fame in the Tsangpo Gorge.

"Ian has this intense desire to be devoured by the unknown," one friend explained, "to simply let things unfold around him and see where he ends up. Don't worry too much. He's not a falling star. He'll land on his feet. He just likes to play intensely. Other people would find the stress overwhelming. He enjoys it, eats it."

There were others who were more concerned. They were worried that this addiction to risk might bear sad fruit — and sooner than they'd like to see. He had crossed a line, they said, and had lost a vital element of self-awareness. "I used to think he was just dancing with the shadows," one friend said. "Now I'm worried that the shadows have him." An associate who wanted to convey alarm as much as maintain discretion made a point of cornering me one afternoon. "He's riding the tiger now. And if you ride the tiger, you can get eaten."

Part of me thought that this could simply be jealousy — that Baker's success had made many envious. Part of it, too, was that he might have intentionally planted these ideas himself as a way of burnishing the romantic myth he was living. The rumor mill in Kathmandu was both fierce and flamboyant, making everyday life often seem like a living soap opera.

But part of me was sincerely worried. Western dollars went far here, but even with that, there seemed to be a gap between his available resources and his lifestyle — the house, the travel, the land outside of the city he had bought with several others to build a retirement resort upon. The book advance was huge, but a contractual dispute with a former publisher meant he had not seen a dime of it yet. Where had all that money come from, anyway? "He likes art, women, beautiful things. It takes money, lots of money," one of his friends observed.

As possibilities and theories took on a life of their own, I began to wonder whether there was something not altogether right behind the plush scene and the heedless, free-spending ways. I thought back to my arrival, to my reverie about Baker as a character from *The Third Man* peering out at me from the shadows. Instead of hiding in the shadows, however, my Harry Lime could have been hiding in plain sight.

I knew that during the '80s, many Westerners in Kathmandu had been involved in one way or another, at one time or another, with the black market. Those least involved — usually diplomats and development workers — had merely circulated their salary checks through it, easily boosting their money. Those with more involvement had gone on "milk runs" to Hong Kong or Bangkok, muling gold or currency back to the city through its notoriously porous airport, which had become a focal point for criminal activity throughout Asia. (It seems no accident that the terrorists who hijacked an Indian Airlines plane this past Christmas had been able to carry guns onto the plane there.) Kathmandu was also a place infamous for its art piracy. Much of Nepal's cultural heritage was spirited out in the late '80s and early '90s at great profit to Western dealers, collectors, and museums. And there were those who got into even deeper scams and were serving hard time in Nepali jails. Kathmandu was a place where people could turn experience into epiphany, but it was also a place where a lot of people fooled themselves into believing that their vices were really virtues.

I thought about having a sit-down with Baker in the spirit of old and deep friendship. But this too left me with mixed feelings. An overfunctioner by nature, I didn't want to play the nag to his reckless trouble boy. I was the one who always turned out the lights, locked the doors, and answered the telephone promptly, and I was getting tired of playing the role. Always a good houseguest, I was wary of offending the host.

In the end, though, I decided I had to speak up. Baker had developed impressive street smarts since college, but he could still be incredibly naive. Kathmandu was full of people with sharp knives and blunt consciences. If Baker was in debt, I was worried that his creditor might sell his marker to a Manangi

mobster; the Manangis were supposedly notorious for their signature form of assassination, which combines stabbing and stomping the victim to death.

With Baker heading to Hong Kong the next day, I didn't have much time to act. That night, I left a note on the doorstep of his library telling him to get me up when he did. But when I woke, he was already out — or so it seemed. In fact, he was downstairs in an obscure corner of the house, stowing valuables away and packing for the trip.

Moving back into the library, surrounded by leopard heads and ghoulish Tibetan iconography, I told him I wanted him to be honest with me. He did admit that there was a deal that had gone wrong some years back, and that money someone had given him to invest had been stolen by an unscrupulous Indian. The investor had been patient but was now asking for his money back — with interest — pushing the total amount Baker owed quite high. Not to be concerned, though: Baker had found someone in Indian intelligence who was ready to help — for a cut, of course.

I still suspected that there was more going on than he wanted to let on. But even if there wasn't, I found it hard to comprehend why he would assume such risk so lightly, and why he would conduct his life so recklessly, especially now that he had reached his forties. I found myself telling him he was getting too old to be such an "edge freak," and that "experience mongering" like his would, by the laws of simple probability, bring him sorrow one day.

Sitting quietly in an armchair, again assuming his grandiloquent tone, Baker said he gravitated toward extremes in life because that was where the most interesting life forms were always to be found. He said that while his path might seem ill-advised, "it is the ill-advised paths that always hold the greatest reward." He had never felt he had gone too far, he insisted. "But then again, there is always a narrow margin between a great adventure and a suicide." He told me not to worry, pointing to some of the statues and icons that filled the room. "I have my protector deities."

Before Baker and I headed to the airport for his trip to Hong Kong, he asked me if I wanted to take a bag back to the States for someone. It would, he told me, be full of human bones and skull cups that some Tibetans in New York would be using for ritual observances. I politely declined, although I did savor the idea of dining out on the story once I got back to New York. What exactly do you say to customs officers if you get stopped bringing in a bag of bones and skulls?

We grabbed a cab to the airport, the back seat almost completely filled up with two gigantic black bags Baker was taking to Hong Kong. The bags were filled with old Tibetan tanka paintings, ubiquitous in the bazaars. "Nothing of any real value," he said, when I asked what was inside.

As Baker placed his bags up on the X-ray belt when he went through security, the guards bantered back and forth with him in Nepali, ignoring the screening machine. "That's what's great about this country," Baker says. "Instead of asking 'What's in the bag? Will you please open it?' they ask, 'Have you moved? Have you a girlfriend? Have you enjoyed it here?'"

It was just after noon when I caught a cab back to town. The midday sun was high and hot. Part of me wanted to stay and simply assume Baker's life. I'd take over the house, take all of the yoginis into the back room, and declare myself the King of Kathmandu. But I knew that this would require a surrender to a certain view of the world I didn't want to make. I had the strong feeling that life here was not for me.

Returning to the house, I was startled to find a leopard head from Baker's collection sitting oddly in the library window, its bared teeth facing outside. The housekeeper could have placed it there absentmindedly. Then again, she could have put it there to ward off some evil spirit that might make a move while the master was away.

Part of me wanted to put the head back up on the shelf as a way of scoffing at all the magical thinking I was surrounded by. But I wouldn't be leaving for a few days, and I figured I could use all the protection I could find. It was a city filled with witch doctors and warlocks, angry creditors who might mount an attack, and expatriate icons who had issued none-too-subtle warnings not to pry too deeply into their affairs.

I left the leopard head right where it was. I would have been a fool not to. M

LAST TANGO IN KATHMANDU

[Cont. from 120] hunters, Baker looked through his range-finder binoculars and saw, on the far side of the falls, an oblong opening cut into the cliff face 20 or 30 feet above the river.

Baker's skepticism made him dubious about the formation actually being a doorway to paradise, and he shrugged it off as simply a geological oddity, perhaps just the real-world equivalent of the "doorway to paradise" myth. Always the explorer, though, he pressed the hunters for directions on how to get over to the door. "That's the problem," they said. "There's no way over."

BAKER'S SUCCESSFUL pilgrimage through Pemako was a realization of some of Tibetan Buddhism's most rarefied ideals. But Baker had certainly not let himself forget the plain folk — nor the shamans, charlatans, and faith healers who minister to them. "Why do you go to these phonies?" I asked him after he had made an offering to a white witch who he said channeled the valley's goddess of prosperity and counteracted black magic. Quoting a similar story about Yeats, he replied that he'd "be a damn fool not to," describing his prostration as a kind of local insurance policy, a ritual he performed just in case.

The acclaim Baker received for his journeys through the fabled Hidden Lands didn't put a dent in his devotion to his other goddesses, either. For most of the time I was around, they called religiously, starting early, continuing through the day and into the

night. They each called to see if it would be okay if they came over, and they reserved appropriate times. They arrived, stood smooth as teak, said polite things in faltering English, and then disappeared with Baker into the back chamber.

In college, Baker had a print of John William Waterhouse's *Hylas and the Nymphs*, which shows a young male being lured into a lily pond by pre-Raphaelite temptresses. He still has the print in his bathroom, along with another copy in the guest quarters. But it is no longer fantasy. I sat down and knew for the first time what it means to be the eunuch in the harem.

Baker believes that this "excess," as he calls it, is no demonstration that he has caved in to desire but instead is part of a spiritually charged process of transcending it. According to the tantric vision, before one can move beyond passion, one must transform passion into a means of spiritual fulfillment. Pointing to a statue of a copulating Buddha, Baker said, "This is not just a woman sitting on his lap. It represents the total unification of the two hemispheres of consciousness. A woman becomes your vehicle . . . basically you see her as the literal conduit in which you embrace all things."

"But is it normal for a 40-year-old to go out with women less than half his age?" I ask.

"Who said anything about normal?" he replied. "Consider it part of my own personal development program. Some people adopt foster kids. I adopt young women. It's a tradition here. They need a way to advance themselves, and we need them. As long as

they're better off at the end of the relationship than when they entered, there's nothing sordid at all."

AS MY STAY began to wind down, the days and nights grew more and more auspicious. One evening we headed to Pashupatinath, next to the city's ancient cremation grounds. Watching bright-orange embers from funeral pyres fly into the black, oily river, Baker, using a Buddhist term, told me that because he felt no "attachment," he was not afraid of death. "I feel like I've died already," he explained, "and that everything after that fall in Norway has been overtime." Baker had always maintained that his interest in the "excess" or the "darkness" was purely academic or philosophical, "an issue of awareness, not of enactment," as he wrote me once. "Far from implying a descent into the illicit and immoral, it is a search for higher values which embrace all that is conventionally repressed, judged, and dismissed. It is a celebration of the mysterious, the ambiguous, and the unknown."

But I began to wonder otherwise. Many of his friends were wondering, too.

There were rumors of once-patient creditors coming back from the past to haunt him for old black-market deals gone sour. There was talk of trust put in the wrong people, of money spent profusely, and of debt — lots of debt. Everyone had heard something, but no one really knew. He was good at keeping secrets, at telling one person one thing and another person something entirely different. ►

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