

## Chapter 5

### The Reluctant World Traveler

My introduction to traveling had not gone well. During our little sojourn in the Canary Islands and Morocco, I had been alternately soaking wet, freezing cold, attacked by a crazed Moroccan, stricken with salmonella food poisoning, locked in a cattle car with farm animals, and lost in the middle of nowhere with no place to go. I prepared to die three times. For a wimp who had never been outside the northeastern US, who had never been on a plane, who had never experienced a foreign culture, and who liked his creature comforts, this was all too much. I resolved to never step foot outside the US again. Sabrina, however, had other ideas. No sooner had we returned from our Moroccan debacle than Sabrina was hard at work planning our next trip. I had a two month summer break in 1973, so this trip would be a big one.

I deserve most of the blame for the next fiasco because I couldn't keep my big mouth shut. The neural connection between my brain and my mouth must be partially severed because I can't stop myself from blurting out what I'm thinking. It happened when I was called in by the Dean at Columbia for my stellar grades in Pathology, and I couldn't stop dissembling because I was on such a roll. It happened again when Gertrude Lockhart tried to dissuade me from marrying Sabrina, and I had to go for the sarcastic rejoinder. In most cases I have paid dearly for my verbal indiscretions. I sure did with Gertrude. I was about to do it again.

One of Columbia's clinical requirements compelled each student to complete a rotation in the Oral Surgery Department at a hospital in Manhattan. I was assigned to Roosevelt Hospital in midtown Manhattan. For two solid months I trudged into its Oral Surgery Department, donned gloves, masks, and surgical gowns, and assisted the surgeons and residents to perform all kinds of unspeakable surgeries. While I hated dentistry, I abhorred oral surgery. It required surgical incisions to cut human flesh, it exposed anatomical structures I did not want to see, and there was lots of blood. I was not physically constituted for such horrors. Nor was I any good at it.

What I was good at was bullshitting and relaxing in my recliner while watching basketball on TV. Much to my dismay, I had not been able to find a profession that would pay a lot of money for those skills, so I was stuck in the Oral Surgery Department at Roosevelt Hospital for the next two months.

I was mortified by what I saw there. It started with simple extractions, then surgical extractions, then impacted third molar extractions, then removal of bony protuberances, then cysts, then tumors, then broken jaws, and then cleft lips and palates. At first I just watched, hoping that would be the



Roosevelt Hospital in New York

extent of my involvement. Soon they wanted me to participate. “There’s no good that can come of that,” I warned. “Someone could get hurt.” The “someone” was me, because cutting flesh and wading in blood up to my elbows would only make me sick. As usual, my protestations were disregarded as cowardly evasions. I had no choice but to wade in. Before long I was extracting teeth, suturing wounds, cutting through bone to remove impacted third molars, and assisting on cleft palate surgeries. But I never got used to it. I abhorred it.

Julius Friedland was the Chief Resident in Oral Surgery at Roosevelt hospital. Julius had long hair tied back in a pony-tail, a scraggly beard, and he dressed like a homeless bum. He and I hit it off immediately. He also sensed my distaste for oral surgery and, to the extent possible, shielded me from the unpleasantness. One day over lunch Julius regaled me with his exploits on his recent trip to Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. His vivid descriptions of the gentle Nepali people, the colorful Hindu culture, the elegant pagodas and stupas, the inexpensive first class restaurants, and the majestic Himalayan Mountains held no interest for me. What caught my attention was that hashish and pot were legal in Nepal. There were roadside shops where different varieties of the highest quality hashish and pot were displayed. One could walk into these shops, sample some hashish, purchase the product of choice, and smoke it wherever you wanted. If you were at a nice restaurant and wanted to light up, so be it. If you were sitting in a park on a pleasant day and wanted to get high, be my guest.

What Julius described was Larry Cashman’s image of paradise. I had curtailed my pot smoking substantially since marrying Sabrina, which was a good thing since my consumption had gotten excessive. Now I only indulged on weekends and social occasions. From the time I was in college, however, I fantasized about a place like Kathmandu. All of my pot procurement and smoking had been done surreptitiously – buying it from lowlifes like FUBAR and concealing it from parents, adults, cops, straight people – pretty much anyone who didn’t get high. In Kathmandu, it was smoking on demand. I couldn’t believe a place like this actually existed. There was, however, a slight problem. Nepal was situated on India’s northeastern border, halfway around the world from New York. Reaching there in 1973 required a titanic journey during which anything could happen. I wanted none of that. Kathmandu may be paradise, but I might have to go through hell to get there. I decided that I wouldn’t mention it to Sabrina.

One night, Sabrina and I were having dinner and she said, “I’ve been thinking about the destination for our next trip. Given what a wimp you are and how poorly you fared in Morocco, I’ve been thinking of something more civilized this time.” This was music to my ears. Plus she didn’t call me a sissy pants. I let her go on. “...maybe somewhere in Europe, like Italy. You’d be right at home with your paisanos. The food is good, the accommodations are clean and comfortable, and the people won’t scare you. It’s a bit expensive for our budget, but I can see we need more amenities for a pussy and crybaby like you. We can even go north through Germany to Amsterdam, where I hear the hashish and pot are good and you can smoke it anywhere. I know you have always dreamed about a place like that.” After what I had been through in Morocco, Europe would be a cakewalk.

And then I did it. The neural connection between my brain and my mouth misfired and I blurted out, “I bet it’s not as good as the hashish in Kathmandu.”

Upon hearing this, Sabrina was taken aback. “What do you know about the hashish in Kathmandu?” While on the road in Afghanistan, Sabrina had heard all about Nepal, Kathmandu, and its hashish, but we had never spoken about it. “Where did you hear about that?”

When the neural connection misfires, the biggest downside is that you don’t have time to concoct a decent lie in response. So I said the first thing that came to mind. “I read about it in National Geographic.” This was a particularly bad retort because Sabrina knew that I never read National Geographic; and she also knew that National Geographic was not in the habit of commenting on the quality of the hashish in the countries it covered.

Sabrina knew I was lying right away. After all, I lied all the time. “You’re full of shit, Cashman.” Sabrina didn’t mince words. “Now tell me where you heard about the hashish in Kathmandu.” The jig was up so I came clean. I told her the whole story from Julius. And that was it. In an instant, due to my verbal indiscretions and given my obvious interest in its hashish, Nepal became the destination for our next trip, and Europe was out.

Sabrina knew all about Nepal from her overland travels through Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan;



**World Travelers on the Magic Bus to Kathmandu**

and longed to go there. It was the next stop on the world travelers’ tour after India. It was the destination where the “Magic Bus,” immortalized in song by The Who, took world travelers for the great drugs. If Sabrina hadn’t been summoned back to the US from her world travels, she was headed to India, Nepal, and Bangkok. From the moment I mentioned Kathmandu and Nepal, she focused on it like a laser with one minor addition. To get to Nepal, you had to go through India. So Larry Cashman, the reluctant traveler, the consummate pansy and wuss, the inveterate wimp and incessant whiner, who had almost died three times in Morocco, was now headed to India and Nepal. Beyond

what I had heard from Julius Friedland, I knew nothing about either place. There was one consolation – at least the hashish was good.

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Anyone seeking care at a dental school in the US must either be poor, eccentric, or a masochist. Those are the only reasons someone would subject themselves to multiple clinic visits at the hands of unqualified practitioners to obtain a service that a qualified dentist could do quickly with no pain. Liselle, the little French tart I tortured with the hot and cold colloid, was a masochist. Another patient,

Dennis Haley, was eccentric. He worked for Pan Am in midtown Manhattan in 1973, when Pan Am was the largest airline in the world. Despite the inconvenience, Dennis would come to the Columbia Dental School clinic each week, I would perform some procedure on him, Fritz Pandopo – my nemesis on Columbia’s faculty - would reject it as sloppy and unsatisfactory, and Dennis would have to come back again the next week. He always showed up, a bit disheveled sometimes, a bit edgy and agitated at other times. This went on for months. During one of these visits, I told Dennis about our impending trip to India and Nepal. Dennis became excited, even energized, when he heard this.

“I’ve been to India many times,” Dennis informed me. “The only way to get there is on Pan Am Flight 001, Pan Am’s round the world flight. It stops in London, Rome, Athens, Beirut, Tehran, Karachi, and New Delhi. It only takes 36 hours. A great flight!” Thirty six hours through places like Beirut, Tehran and Karachi - I didn’t like this one bit.

“No worries,” Dennis assured me. “I’ll get you a cheap ticket through Pan Am. I’ll even arrange for you to stay in a friend’s guest house when you arrive in New Delhi, and he’ll pick you up at the airport.” This sounded better to me than Sabrina’s arrival mode of choice – arriving in strange city with no hotel and no plans, and then traipsing through the city on foot carrying a backpack and searching for a cheap hotel.

Sabrina was skeptical when I told her about Dennis’ offer. “From everything you’ve told me about Dennis Haley, he is mentally unbalanced at best and downright crazy at worst. Do you think we can trust him?” Dennis might be crazy, but I wanted to be picked up at the airport in Delhi, preferably in an air-conditioned sedan, and taken to a guest house with clean sheets and a bathroom. “Have no fears,” I declared. “I will make sure Dennis delivers.”

Dennis delivered, all right. On schedule our reduced fare tickets arrived, only \$300 round trip to Delhi. Dennis’ friend, Arjun Banerjee, would meet us at the airport. “Your flight arrives in Delhi at 3 AM. Arjun will have a sign with your name. When you exit the terminal, go directly to Arjun and he will take care of you.” This all sounded too good and too easy to be true. “One more thing,” Dennis added. “Can you also deliver this to Arjun?” Dennis pulled a white box from his backpack containing six quarts of Johnny Walker Black Scotch. Dennis was also an alcoholic, a fact I neglected to mention to Sabrina, and he and Arjun liked to knock back a few tall ones when they were together. “This little gift will make Arjun very happy.”

Neither Sabrina nor I had any idea what the rules were for carrying alcohol into India. In 1973 there was no internet to find out quickly – how did we live without the internet – and we were leaving in several days. So we packed the scotch in our backpacks and took off on our adventure to India and Nepal.

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For anyone who has not traveled much, I do not recommend 36 hour flights. Sitting in steerage, the seats were cramped and the food was bad. By the time we reached Athens, we had been airborne for 12 hours and in transit for 17 hours. At least the people in the London, Rome, and Athens airports looked normal to me. When we arrived in Beirut, things changed. There were shades of Morocco everywhere. I started getting nervous. By the time we reached Tehran, any vestige of western culture had vanished. When we exited the plane in Karachi, it was 115 degrees, the heat was stifling, and my horror quotient was off the charts.

When we finally reached Delhi at 3 AM, my worst fears were confirmed. It was hot, muggy, and polluted. Chaos reigned and the airport was a shambles. The lines for immigration seemed endless. When we got to Customs Inspection, the pompous Indian officials dressed in their finest khaki uniforms leered judgmentally at every traveler. Because young couples traveling with backpacks fit their profile for drug smugglers, we were told to open our backpacks for a thorough search. We didn't have any drugs, but they did find Dennis' six bottles of scotch.

"What do you intend to do with this alcohol?" the overbearing Customs official asked. I told him it was for Arjun who was waiting outside. "It is illegal to bring alcohol into India. Please follow me. She can wait here." I was aghast when they led me away but told Sabrina to stay behind.

This was my worst nightmare. Jet-lagged, disoriented, and weak from the stifling heat, I was being led to a detention center by two Indian Customs officials without Sabrina. I wanted to strangle Dennis Haley. I resolved to strangle Arjun Banerjee if I ever got out of jail. My innards rumbled with fear as I pondered my options. Could I cut and run? Not likely with these two Indian ruffians grasping my arms. Then it came to me. For the true coward, it's any port in a storm. When we were out of earshot, I turned to my captors and pleaded, "You should take my wife instead of me. She can answer your questions better." It was true, you know. Sabrina had much more experience in tight situations. There are no depths to which a coward will not stoop. My Indian captors looked at me with scorn and disbelief. "You would have your wife detained instead of you? Sir, you have no shame." That described me perfectly. It was worth a try, though.

I was taken to a room with windows but no glass panes. It was stifling hot and I was sweating profusely. There were insects everywhere – crawling, flying, buzzing. I am deathly afraid of insects and it seemed that they were all intent on attacking me. After fifteen minutes, a Customs official came into the room. "Bringing unauthorized alcohol into the country is a serious offense. It carries a fine and possible imprisonment. We must take you to the police station to book you."

I was shivering with fear at the prospect of being imprisoned in an Indian jail. My jailer sensed my discomfort. "Please don't take me to jail," I pleaded. "Are there no other options?"

My antagonist's face suddenly lit up. "There is one other option. You could pay the fine right here and we can dispense with the other formalities. I must confiscate the alcohol, of course, and I have no receipts with me at this time. Once the fine is paid, you can return to your wife."

And so, Larry Cashman, the reluctant world traveler, having just been shaken down by an Indian Customs official, learned one of the most important lessons about living in the developing world. If you have money, everything can be arranged.

When I emerged from the detention room, Sabrina was surprised to see me smiling and shaking hands with my captors. After all, when a scammer gets scammed, he acknowledges defeat graciously in hopes of repeating the scam on another. “What happened?” she asked incredulously. Quite pleased with myself for dodging the bullet, I announced proudly, “Well, we’re \$100 poorer and the scotch is gone, but we’re free to go.” Sabrina was proud of me and said that, with a few more performances like this, I wouldn’t be a candy ass anymore.

When we finally exited the Delhi airport terminal, it was 5 AM and the sun was rising. It was total chaos outside as we exited, with baggage handlers trying to grab our backpacks and taxi drivers calling for our attention. Right in front of the crowd was a middle aged Indian gentleman holding a sign with **LARRY CASHMAN** in big, bold letters. It was Arjun Banerjee. When he saw us, the first thing he said was “Did you bring the scotch?” That was the last straw. I went straight for his neck and tried to strangle him. Sabrina restrained me and explained the ordeal I had just been through. As Arjun dusted himself off, he looked at me incredulously. “Didn’t Dennis explain? You put a \$50 bill in the box with the scotch. When the Customs official opens it, he will take the money and wave you through. It’s called a bribe, you idiot.” Dennis had neglected to explain this minor detail. Now I really wanted to kill him.



New Delhi Airport 1973

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All in all, I was not displeased with my situation. I had survived the ordeal with Indian Customs, Sabrina was proud of me, Arjun was there to meet us, we were about to be whisked to our guest house, and I would soon reach nirvana in Kathmandu. Arjun’s vehicle was not exactly the air conditioned sedan I was expecting. It was an Indian-manufactured Ambassador, the dilapidated clunker that has affectionately been labeled the ugliest car in the world. In the 1970s India was a quasi-socialist state firmly within the Soviet Union sphere of influence. To protect its auto market, only Indian made vehicles could be purchased and registered, plus some equally ugly and disreputable cars manufactured in Eastern Europe. Arjun bellowed at his driver to fetch our backpacks and get us out of the airport. The driver, a slimy little imp, seemed tentative and intimidated by Arjun. The rod-like stick that Arjun nervously pounded against his fist could have that effect. We all jumped into the Ambassador and took off.

The road from the airport was a one lane road. Oncoming vehicles had to yield to allow cars coming in the opposite direction to pass. Usually the smaller car yielded to the larger car. It was the law of the jungle. Arjun's driver did not understand this rule very well. He would drive straight at an oncoming truck, like he was playing a game of chicken, and swerve out of the way at the last moment. The first time, he swerved with time to spare. The second time, he allowed the oncoming truck to get closer, and he swerved harder. The third time was an even closer call. By this time, Arjun was screaming excitedly at the driver, to no effect. The fourth time, our driver was going straight at the oncoming vehicle, hell for leather and heel to the wheel, determined not to be the first to blink. Sabrina and I looked at each other in disbelief. We had just survived a 36 hour plane ride in steerage, we had been shaken down at the airport by corrupt Indian officials, and now we were going to die in this ugly little Ambassador being piloted by Arjun's unctuous little driver who thought he was Mario Andretti speeding around the Daytona Beach Race Track.

As we drove straight at the oncoming truck, with Arjun screaming at the driver in the front and Sabrina and I screaming in the back, the driver swerved at the last possible second. Only this time he lost control of the vehicle and it careened off the road. When it finally came to a halt, Sabrina and I watched incredulously as Arjun pulled the driver out of the car, threw him to the ground, and started to beat him with his stick. Then he kicked him in the ass several times for good measure. Had I not been paralyzed with fear, I would have thrashed him and given him some shoe leather myself. Arjun left the driver on the side of the road as we drove away.

"What was that all about?" Sabrina asked Arjun. I was still in shock and couldn't speak. "Oh, he was a new driver. I wanted to test him before hiring him. I think he's been drinking," Arjun explained nonchalantly. Sabrina was furious. "You tried out a new driver on us? He could have killed us." Then, for the first time in our travels, Sabrina lost it as she lunged for Arjun's jugular and tried to strangle him. I should have let her finish him off right then and there, but we needed him to drive, so this time I restrained her. We didn't speak to him again until we reached the guest house, which turned out to be Arjun's house with a guest bedroom. At least it had a bed, a bathroom and was tolerably clean, so we retired to our room to recover from jet lag and ponder our next move.



**Cows in New Delhi's streets**

We spent a day exploring New Delhi, which confirmed that our next move was to get out of there pronto. New Delhi in 1973 was a cesspool with ten million people living in it. We arrived at the height of the monsoon season, when torrential rains burst forth from the clouds every day like clockwork. The streets were flooded and the traffic jams were endless. Delhi, however, had several unique features. There were huge cows and bulls everywhere. Hindus revere cows and they are free to wander unfettered. They could be sitting right in the middle of the road and the cars would drive around them. The other endearing feature that Delhi had in

spades was people shitting on the side of the road. They would walk along the side of the road and, nonchalantly and unreservedly, pull their pants down in one swift motion, finish their business in seconds, then pull their pants right up and walk away. There was no lounging on the john reading a magazine in Delhi. Nor did I see any toilet paper. I don't deal well with shit, and there were human and animal feces everywhere in Delhi. We found a travel agent, bought an air ticket to Kathmandu, and planned to leave the next day.

That night I informed Arjun of our plan. He responded with a huge grin on his face adding, "Oh by the way, have you heard that Nepal made the sale and smoking of hashish and marijuana illegal yesterday?" Arjun obviously was still smarting from getting his neck wrung. He continued by saying, "Richard Nixon promised Kathmandu a piped water system in return for making hashish and marijuana illegal." I was speechless. I had traveled halfway around the world to enjoy Kathmandu's delicacies unrestrained. I had endured a 36 hour flight. I had been shaken down by Indian Customs officials and survived a near death experience on New Delhi's highways. And hashish became illegal in Nepal two days before I arrived because of that son of a bitch Nixon. Damn his eyes. With this little stunt Nixon earned my eternal enmity. You can imagine my immense joy when I saw him, a year later, facing impeachment while dangling before the Senate Judiciary Committee investigating Watergate. To this day I think Nixon did it just to piss me off.

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**Durbar Square Kathmandu**

As our plane made its circular descent into Kathmandu Valley, the first thing I noticed was the ubiquitous presence of pagodas and stupas. There were no tall concrete buildings, no highways, and not many cars on the roads. Surrounded by cloud-shrouded mountains on all sides, Kathmandu seemed like a Buddhist Shangri-La. When we disembarked from the plane, Shangri-La more closely resembled the cesspool we just left in New Delhi. The scene at the airport was equally chaotic, vehicular traffic was equally disorderly, the cows and bulls were equally nonchalant as they wandered the streets at their leisure, and the people dropped their drawers to take a shit with equal rapidity.

There was one major difference between Kathmandu and New Delhi, though. The total population of Kathmandu was only 300,000, the equivalent of a small neighborhood in Delhi. It was much easier to navigate around the cows and bulls in a small city like Kathmandu.

We went directly to the Kathmandu Guest House to look for lodging. While traveling through Afghanistan, Sabrina's fellow world travelers always mentioned the Kathmandu Guest House as their accommodation of choice. It was cheap, conveniently located, relatively civilized, and there was always



hashish aplenty. After checking in, we set out to explore the city. The scars from the recently closed hashish shops could be seen everywhere. The signs were still there, but the doors were bolted closed and the windows were boarded up. What a missed opportunity. Last week these shops were buzzing with enthusiasts sampling the many varieties of hashish on offer. Now there were only vacant stalls that had been quickly evacuated. In addition to Arjun and Dennis Haley, I also wanted to strangle Nixon.

Fortunately there was still plenty of hashish at the Kathmandu Guest House. The hippies and world travelers, who occupied its rooms, had purchased large stocks to tide them over as the day of reckoning approached. Also, although the hashish shops had been closed, there was still plenty of hashish and weed being sold everywhere, and it was cheap. Back in New York City, smoking hashish was a delicacy to be savored. Small bits of hashish were chipped from a larger chunk and placed in a pipe or mixed with tobacco for smoking. At the Kathmandu Guest house, a brick of hashish was placed in a hookah surrounded by hot charcoal, fired up until it was nearly flaming, and smoked by two or three people at a time. The world travelers at the Kathmandu Guest House were high all the time.



Hashish shop in Kathmandu before the ban

This was also my first exposure to hard core world travelers, and it was not pleasant. They came in all shapes and sizes – Brits, Aussies, Germans, French, Scandinavians, and Americans. Although anthropoid in shape, there is still considerable disagreement among biologists and anthropologists whether world travelers, or Orbis Peregrinator in the scientific vernacular, are actually humanoid or some lower form of biological life. In general, world travelers are lazy, shiftless, untrustworthy losers who lacked a scintilla of intellectual curiosity, ambition or direction, had no money, and spent their lives wandering around the world in search of the best drugs, which they consumed and trafficked. One would think that Larry Cashman, the inveterate scoundrel and ne'er do well, would have a natural affinity for such characters.

But world travelers had one characteristic that I cannot tolerate – they were filthy and they smelled. It seemed that the concept of bathing had not entered the world traveler lexicon. Perhaps it was an allergy to soap. Perhaps they couldn't afford soap. Perhaps they liked the look of long, matted hair with cooties and rotten teeth. Perhaps they were attracted to the aroma emanating from their unbrushed teeth and unwashed armpits covered by clothes that still had food stains from Iran. Whatever it was, the world travelers we met at the Kathmandu Guest House were the scraggiest, filthiest, and stinkiest bunch of losers that I have ever seen to this day. I was afraid that, if I got to close to one of them, their fleas or cooties would jump onto me. Given how badly they smelled, I kept my distance.

Sabrina, on the other hand, had a natural simpatico with world travelers. She had consorted with them during her travels through the Middle East and Afghanistan, so she was acclimatized to their idiosyncrasies. She couldn't tolerate the filth and the smell, to be sure, but she could understand their mentality. By the time we reached Kathmandu, the rainy season had set in. It was raining every day. We got out to see the city and its surroundings, and even traveled into the countryside. Sabrina made sure that we also spent part of every day hanging out with the world travelers.

When world travelers hang out together, the conversation quickly turns to the places they have traveled. There are several reasons. First of all, most of them are too stupid to be able to discuss anything else. Very few world travelers become rocket scientists. Second, it establishes their bona fides in the world traveler pecking order. The more remote, dangerous, undeveloped and uncivilized the places they traveled, the higher their World Traveler (WT) ranking. I would have added a filth and stink index, because they seemed correlated. But wusses like me who bathed regularly had no stature in the WT rankings. Finally, it was a good way to find out where to travel next. This final reason explained why Sabrina tolerated and engaged the world travelers. After four weeks in Nepal, we needed to plan the final month of our trip. After hearing about every state and region in India, she decided that our next destination should be the northern Indian state of Kashmir.

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Of all the places Sabrina could choose in India, she had to choose Kashmir, a territory disputed by India and Pakistan over which the two countries had already fought three wars; and where Pakistan continued to infiltrate insurgents to stir up trouble. Fortunately I was totally ignorant of geopolitical conflict at this stage of my life; otherwise I would have avoided a place where three wars had been fought. The only descriptions that mattered to me were that Kashmir was the most remote, pristine, and exotic state in India; and there were few tourists, not many world travelers, and even fewer cows and bulls to dodge because it was predominantly Muslim.

Srinagar, Kashmir's capital, straddled Dal Lake, which has been dubbed the Jewel in the Crown of Kashmir. It was a huge lake, covering 26 square kilometers, with crystal clear water and dotted by colorful Mughal Gardens. What I liked best were the houseboats. Instead of staying at a flea bag hotel, you could rent a houseboat, built in the style of the British Raj, moored on the shores of Dal Lake for a pittance. Kashmir was sounding better to me all the time.



Cashman and Sabrina's Houseboat on Dal Lake

We quickly found a houseboat and rented it for \$100 per month. It had a bedroom, a dining



**Shikara boats on Dal Lak**

Ghulmarg and Sonamarg, then ride by horseback up to the glaciers. One could get pretty comfortable in Kashmir.

What I liked best, though, was having servants. I could lie on the veranda of the houseboat and order up anything I wanted. A cool drink, an afternoon snack, a bowl of hashish – I would tell Abdallah, our houseboy, and it was done. Occasionally, Sabrina would want to see some oriental carpets, or wood carvings, or silk weavings. She would tell Abdallah and he would have the merchants bring their wares by boat directly to our sitting room for display. Our meals were served like clockwork. Our clothes were washed, ironed, and back to us in a day. The houseboat was kept immaculately clean. I could do anything with one finger, the one I used to point to what I wanted. Sabrina and I got spoiled while staying on that houseboat. When we returned from Kashmir, we would reminisce nostalgically about our life with servants, and speculate whether we would ever live like that again. Then I thought about that expat honky in Marrakech with his Mercedes, his driver, his mansion, and his servants. Somehow he had finagled his way to a life like that. I wondered whether we could ever do the same.

Living the life on Dal Lake had one drawback. They only served Indian food at our houseboat, and I had never eaten Indian food. No macaroni and cheese, no hamburgers, and no pasta on our houseboat menu. My bowel rumblings started on the second day and never stopped. The only way I could separate myself from a toilet was by eating only rice or not eating at all. Srinagar town had no western restaurant in those days, so there was no food for me there. There was an Oberoi Hotel not far away but Sultan, our houseboat owner, warned us that it was too expensive. Compared to the rates at his houseboat, a Big Mac was too expensive. I cut my food consumption drastically so I could enjoy the sights and sounds of Kashmir and Dal Lake without brown stains on my underwear.

After a month of this, I had lost 15 pounds and my appearance was skeletal, not dissimilar to how I looked during my dissolute period in college. The day before we planned to leave Srinagar, Sabrina had enough. “You look horrible and I can’t stand your complaining any longer. I don’t care how much it costs. We are going to the Oberoi Hotel to get you a meal.”

The Oberoi Hotel was palatial. It had expansive grounds, an opulent lobby, nicely appointed rooms, and most important, a magnificent breakfast buffet. In addition to the mandatory Indian fare,

there were pancakes, French toast, waffles, omelets, fried rice, steaks, fish, pasta, pastries, fresh fruit, exotic drinks, ice cream – I could go on and on. After starving for four weeks, I gorged on the cornucopia of food. And the cost of that breakfast buffet was only three dollars. In the pantheon of great meals I ever had, this one ranked right up there with the Paella at the Gran Hotel Las Palmas, the pasta in Casablanca, and the tea, eggs, and biscuits at the guesthouse when we got off the train from Fes. Once again, I was rescued from the jaws of despair by a great meal.

I was pretty angry with Sultan for scaring us away from the Oberoi. “Why did you tell us the Oberoi was too expensive? We had a great meal at the breakfast buffet for only three dollars.”

Sultan seemed astonished by my reaction. “Three dollars for breakfast is not too expensive? You only pay three dollars per day for my houseboat. Was that sob story about your being a poor student with no money just a lie to get a cheap rate? Now that I know you’re such a big shot, I’m increasing the daily rate for my houseboat to \$20 per day.” The neural connection between my mouth and my brain had misfired again. I decided to keep my mouth shut until we departed India, which we did the next day.