

Travel Studies in Asia: Tales of Danger and Adventure

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Abstract

This article reflects a fifteen-year history conducting a travel course within the Philosophy Program at the University of Guam. The author speaks to the dangers various courses have encountered over the years and how they deal with them. There is an effort to speak to shortcomings of earlier efforts and what was learned along the way. Accordingly, the author concludes with some basic structural principles that form a viable model for student travel courses. Over the last fifteen years the Philosophy Program at the University of Guam (UOG) has offered a course entitled Travel Studies in Asia (PI 485) on an alternating-years summer school schedule (plus one intersession Christmas break course). Through this course, UOG students and community members have visited India, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Hong Kong, Mongolia, China, and Tibet. Thus far, one individual, the author of this article, Dr. Kim Skoog, has conducted all offerings of this course. Length of these courses ranged from three to six weeks.

Many university travel or field study courses are set up through an arrangement with a regional university in the area they are visiting or alternatively with a group of local scholars; usually the students stay in one locale for most or all of the time. In contrast, the UOG philosophy travel courses took the travel aspect of the class title very seriously; hence, students on these courses were on the road and traveling to a new location daily.

This made for some very long days, as nearly the whole of each course was conducted on a bus traveling from one remote location to another.¹ Discomfort from these frequent “marathon” bus rides naturally gave rise to some short tempers, hostility, and even rebellion if not dealt with by the trip instructor and/or local organizer in a timely manner. If taken in a somewhat figurative sense, this anger could be recognized as the most frequent and predictable “danger” that had to be dealt with in conducting these courses—the roar of the home crowd. Yet, though this inevitable tension could be acknowledged as the most constant and real threat to the stability and success of these sorts of educational travel trips, this concern is not within the scope of this article; it really doesn’t seem to qualify as “tales of danger and adventure.” Instead it can be initially observed that any time one travels (alone or in a travel group), there are necessarily dangers—especially in non-industrialized nations—which can be classified in two broad categories: anticipated and unanticipated dangers.

Anticipated Dangers

Anticipated dangers usually arise from the topological makeup of the area to be traveled. As much of the travel in past courses has been in some of the highest, mountainous terrains on the planet, there is a certain set of challenges that one must anticipate and be ready to deal with should some threat to the group arise. As an example, on the second UOG philosophy travel trip I set up and conducted, travel was limited to mainly high mountain areas, i.e., northern India in addition to Nepal and Tibet. Toward the end of the India portion of the trip, we attended an academic conference on Vedanta philosophy; it was held at an ashram on the banks of the Ganges River in Rishikesh, India.² The conference organizers had made post-conference travel plans that would take a number of scholars and conference attendees on something of a spiritual and cultural journey to the remote spiritual center of Badrinath, India. However, due to a number of logistical reasons coupled with concerns over road and weather conditions, the organizers decided to cancel those travel plans; consequently, the UOG philosophy travel class, which had included this travel within their itinerary, turned out to be the *only* group of people from the conference that actually followed through with the plan to travel to one of the most revered, though reclusive and distant places in all of India.

On the morning that we were to leave Rishikesh and head north, a local Hindu priest was summoned to the group’s bus and after we all climbed aboard with our belongings, he proceeded to do a ritual that ended with crushing several anointed coconuts on the front bumper of the rented bus. When I asked the local guide and the bus driver what was the significance of this ritual, they told me that there had been a couple of fatal accidents by religious pilgrims that spring in traveling up to Badrinath so local officials had begun to have all vehicles undergo this ritual as a “safety precaution.” At that moment, presumably, any conscientious tour guide would pause and ask themselves if they were about to subject their group to unwarranted danger. In this case, I reflected on the fact that

the Indian government requires a special license for alpine bus drivers and mandates permits for groups planning to travel along this long, narrow, and windy road up and across several mountains leading to this highly revered Vaishnavite temple and cultural center on the Indian/Tibet boarder.³ Thereupon, I felt some confidence that the group was in safe hands—coupled with the fact that our tour company had hired one of the most highly qualified and seasoned alpine drivers available. Arguably, it would have been safer if we had joined with the other conference attendees and decided against travel to this mountainous retreat; however, this concern over safety has to be weighed against the educational benefit of visiting a very authentic cultural and religious location where the students could learn a great deal.⁴ Further, anyone traveling to Badrinath will see some of the most beautiful and awe inspiring vistas in India. Indeed, how could we not allow a bunch of students from the tropics to engage in their first snow ball fight—in July no less?

I could speak to a number of similar decisions that I had to make, and in every case, I always asked myself if we had the most qualified person driving the bus. Was our bus in good condition (relatively speaking)? Had the route proved to be a generally safe and authorized area for tourists and pilgrims to travel? Still, a tour leader should not be afraid to say “no” to any proposed course itinerary adjustment when concerns over safety arise, even if the majority of the group wants to go in that direction.

Consider the situation where on two similar occasions I decided against the majority sentiment of participants and recoiled from traveling on road conditions that I considered too dangerous. When departing from the base camp of Mt. Everest, there is a fairly long stretch of “highway” that takes one from the rough trekker’s roads leading to the camp, back to the main road that leads to the Nepal/Tibet border. Due to this long distance, it is usually about ten o’clock at night before the bus reaches the last town before an open expanse of road that takes one through a mountain pass (18,000+ feet) and then to the Chinese border town next to Nepal around midnight. On a couple of occasions when my groups were on this road after a thrilling day at the base camp, most in the group wished to leave Tibet that night by traveling the last segment of the road, pushing on hard through the night till we reached the border. Yet, due to falling temperatures at night in these high altitudes, the roads usually become icy and are often covered with blowing snow. After talking to the Tibetan guide and driver on both occasions, I resisted the popular sentiment and made the class stay overnight at fairly rustic accommodations. It wasn’t until morning that we drove through the pass and border area with Nepal. As a point of “vindication,” students without exception thanked me in the afternoon for my decision, not necessarily for safety reasons, but because this covers some of the most magnificent scenery on the entire trip, all of which would have been rendered invisible due to the darkness of night had we pushed through. Of particular significance on this section of road is the occasion when the bus travels under and through a magnificent 200 foot waterfall that cascades onto a cement overhang directly above the road; moreover, brilliant green foliage covers the steep Himalayan mountains on each side of the road; one is witness to an extraordinary high altitude rain forest set in a narrow mountain gorge a short distance from the Friendship Bridge that connects Nepal and Tibet by road. Given that students had been traveling for nearly five days on the arid, desert-like Tibetan plateau, the green tropic-like environment leading to Nepal is particularly striking.

Good tour leaders need to keep their wits about them at all times when overseeing the course’s travel as we have just seen in dealing with anticipated dangers. Here one needs to make an informed decision through consulting with the local tour guide traveling with the group, seeking information from government and local officials about road conditions and areas of particular concern, weighing out the wishes of the group members against the potential dangers presented by the surroundings before deciding to travel forward. Success often hinges on making the initial decision regarding the best tour operator to set up your course. But what if the dangers are *unanticipated* and require much more spontaneous and immediate judgments? Again, these sorts of unexpected events are bound to happen and one must remain calm and do the best that one can to make sure everyone is out of harm’s way. Clearly, safety outweighs any overarching educational goals.

Unanticipated Threats

To a certain extent, anyone setting up such an ambitious and varied tour must possess a great deal of self-confidence, perhaps to the point of viewing oneself as “invincible.” Like a soldier sent to a combat arena, one has an inner sense of good fortune, that a guardian angel, if you like, is overseeing one’s safe passage. Most likely one doesn’t articulate or even fully recognize this sentiment; nevertheless, it provides the courage, strength, and self-reliance that allow one to persevere and move forward on these adventure trips. Additionally, one needs to keep reminding oneself *and others on the trip* that the tour guide and driver have families and do this sort of travel every day throughout the year. They would not direct our trip to a particular area if they saw it as truly dangerous and had even a remote chance of calamity.

For the unfamiliar, traveling on rough, single lane roads along the sides of mountains 12,000 – 18,000 feet above sea level, where there are 400 – 500 foot drop offs with no guard rails, might be cause for alarm. Yet, if the tour driver steers these routes weekly, then he knows the roads well and appreciates the importance of getting some rest before driving. This high altitude driving is no more dangerous than driving to work at high speeds on a busy freeway during rush hour in such cities as Chicago or Los Angeles. Yet, if one's brakes suddenly become suspect, as occurred on our first visit to Nepal, then this sense of security in the driver's experience suddenly becomes undermined in the face of this potential calamity.

After having spent a day in picturesque Pokara, Nepal, high in the mountains west of Kathmandu, we set out in the morning heading east toward the capital. This is a particularly beautiful drive through the lush green mountain sides of rural Nepal, all covered with terraced hill sides and quaint cottages. All was peaceful, still recalling our previous night's calm boating on Pokara's famed Phewa Lake with the spectacular Annapurna mountain range in the distance. Suddenly, without warning, the driver began to mumble about difficulty controlling the bus, stamp on the brake pedal continuously, and slammed the gear box into lower and lower gears in an effort to slow our rapid descent down the mountain side. Our national guide, Ganesh, promptly came to my side and squatted down next to me in order to inform me of the obvious: that the bus was developing problems with its brakes. Feeling helpless, we both watched in utter fear as the driver continued to use all the driving skills to slow what could easily become a runaway vehicle down the mountain side. We bolted back and forth on the mountain cutbacks downward on the road. The bus engine whined and shook as it revved to higher RPMs, serving as the decisive determinant between survival and certain disaster. Gradually the roadway began to be less steep and the engine finally diminished its rate of revolution. We eventually reached a section of the road part way down where we could level out and stabilize our descent. Pulling off the main road, we drifted to a stop; two members of the crew jumped off the bus and blocked its wheels to prevent any further movement down the mountain. Surprisingly the group remained relatively calm. I don't think most really understood the dangers we were facing, perhaps due to the skill of the driver to use engine compression as the central means to work our way down the steep mountain side.



Badrinath Temple, India

While thankful for the safety from the past mountain side descent, we now found ourselves stuck in the middle of what seemed to be nowhere, a good four hours drive from Kathmandu, still no brakes when driving on some of the highest mountain roads in the world, and only about six hours left of daylight. The driver and tour personnel huddled and soon a plan was hatched. The onboard cooks were quickly hailed off the bus. They unloaded their portable gas cooker and food reserves with the instruction to prepare an early lunch for the passengers. Meanwhile, the driver had immediately snaked under the front of the bus. A thorough inspection determined the cause of the brake's deterioration. Within 20 minutes, our guide and bus driver had hitched a ride headed back to a gas station we had passed about ten miles back. There was no time to waste; it was dangerous to remain alone and immobile in the outer areas of Nepal. Besides the chance encounter with Maoist rebels, we would be faced with cold evening mountain weather conditions with no blankets for sleeping on the bus.

Some of our group used this time to hop outside the bus, take a few pictures, watch the cooks behind the bus, and visit a local bush for a much needed bathroom break. Though we were apparently away from all civilization, within

a few minutes we were visited by several groups of children, a phenomenon that always surprised us no matter how remote the location. Not wishing to waste a cultural interaction opportunity, we outstretched our arms with pieces of candy and empty water bottles. Besides the photo opportunities with group members, the exchange of friendly smiles served as a nice diversion from our perilous situation. We shared our lunch with them, and before we knew it our search party had returned with a bag of brake parts.

Soon we found ourselves looking at our driver and several of the tour assistants squatting on the paved road in front of the bus with the parts of both front wheels' brake assemblies spewed all over the road. Our future destiny depended on these oily pieces of metal on the road with our bus in the background, propped up by some rocks on one side and a shaky car jack on the other side. The battle between man and machine continued on, as nearly everyone was out of the bus by now watching with intense concern. Only the local children seemed to find this situation amusing and continued to laugh and point as the repair work continued at a steady pace. To our surprise and delight, the three "mechanics" were able to assemble the brakes with the new parts in less than a half hour and we were back on board and on our way. We waved goodbye to our newly acquired Nepalese friends and gave a sigh of relief as a possible calamity had been reduced to an inconvenience. The worst of our trouble became only a late night arrival in Kathmandu.

While this sudden mechanical breakdown of our vehicle was particularly troubling due to its location on dangerous roads, and one would surely hope such automotive breakdowns would not occur there, I cannot say that such breakdowns, especially using third world vehicles manufactured in India or China, are *completely* unexpected. This scare is nowhere as challenging as the *truly* unexpected. I can recall two such unexpected adversities that stand apart from similar but less formidable threats through the years. The first event happened earlier in my experiences as a travel course director when our group was traveling in southern India under the guidance of our national guide, Ganesh, once again. We had just finished our southern swing through India, having gone through Trivandrum and Madurai and were on the home stretch headed for Madras where we had plane reservations for our departure from India and arrival into Sri Lanka. Our trip through the state of Tamil Nadu had been uneventful and we were looking forward to the end of a long, hot, and dusty month-long trip through India. As we were passing through a small town on the road to Madras, the bus made an unexpected stop. After a few minutes of waiting for the bus to start up again, I realized this was not an expected or usual stop. I went to the front of the bus and began to communicate with Ganesh who had just returned to the bus after talking to a number of men gathered in front of the bus, blocking the road.

It turned out that while we were traveling through Tamil Nadu, a number of unions—including the union of drivers—had gone on strike to protest a recent incident that had happened in a nearby town. We were told that this was a five-day strike and that all motor transportation through the state was to cease. Since our tour bus was a particularly visible tourist vehicle, they made it clear that we were to cease any further movement in or out of this small rural town, which did not even appear to have hotel accommodations. As we began to talk of possible options and I informed my group of the situation, the mob of angry men began to encircle the bus and prod some of us with sticks and their hands through open windows. No one was hurt, but naturally everyone began to ask about the situation and showed increasing signs of alarm. I instructed everyone that we needed to be calm, no one was in serious danger and that we were doing the best we could do to negotiate with the union leaders. Everyone on the bus was told to close their windows other than perhaps a small crack to let some fresh air into the non-AC bus. My concerns lie not only with the immediate presence of the union protestors and the prospect of sleeping on the bus for five days, but with the danger of missing our plane in Madras. Besides having to pay a fairly stiff fine for missing our plane in two days, we also had to face the reality that it would be extremely difficult to find eighteen open seats on an outbound flight during the peak tourist season. Perhaps most saddening, our visit to Sri Lanka would have to be scrapped and we would instead now have to try and rush back to Bangkok, Thailand and catch our departure plane for Guam.

Ganesh, the driver, and I went back into the crowd and asked that the local union official sit down at a local tea shop and talk about the strike. The discourse began in English but soon shifted to Hindi or perhaps Tamul (I know neither language) and went on for over thirty minutes, ranging from cordial greetings to standing heated exchanges with the back of hands slapping the chest of each other. At about the point when I had all but given up any hope for a solution to this impasse, things started to cool off. I saw an occasional head nod from side to side and an occasional smile, all traditional Indian signs of agreement. Suddenly, Ganesh nodded to me, signaling that we should go back to the bus. The bus driver started the engine, the crowd shifted out of the way as the barrier was moved to the side wide enough to allow us to leave the area. I didn't dare say anything to the driver or Ganesh until we were well out of the town. However, eventually I could hold back no more and asked him what had just taken place.

I was informed that initially there had been little compromise as the leaders had been stopping traffic all day. They did not want to show signs of weakness to anyone in the town. This was especially true for strikers who had taken a significant loss of pay to go out on strike. But apparently there was some luck on our side, as Ganesh pulled out his union card and it was quickly revealed that he had some rank of importance in the union; plus he had helped negotiate some significant concessions on behalf of several unions in past contracts. His name was somewhat known in this area. Given this local notoriety and his insistence on allowing immediate passage due to our plane connections, the local strike leaders finally conceded and with the shaking of a few heads and a few hands, everyone was semi-agreeable to let us go. He had them write out a note of clear passage for the rest of the trip, so with not much confrontation, we drove straight through to Madras with time to spare. In this case the resolution of the problem was not due to me, but to the personnel of the dedicated and motivated tour company which I had hired for the group.

Time and time again, when tight spots arise, be it bribe requests, local political disputes, or unfriendly officials at road check points, having a local guide with some clout and influence squelched a potential crisis at its inception. In the incident mentioned above, small portable cell phones had not yet been available; however, in more recent years this technological device has proved to be a life saver many times over, as a quick call to a top government official that the guide knows quickly causes the local official or gate guard to back down and pass the bus through without incident. It should be stressed that I am speaking of rare incidents, probably no more than one or two incidents a trip, if that many. With the hiring of a top tour company, *based in the country traveled*, and asking for one of the company officials to accompany the group, these potential and unexpected hostilities can be quelled without incident, often with the students never aware of the dangers that arose temporarily. However, some destinations (e.g., Nepal) can regularly present faculty travel study leaders with such challenges and ethical dilemmas and they should prepare themselves before the trip with expert legal and political-cultural advice, options for managing such situations, and even role-playing with their students or other faculty.

On a few rare occasions, however, no advanced arrangements could prepare us for a monumental, historical event that put the group in the middle of a volatile situation. On the last philosophy trip through Tibet and into Nepal, our group managed to arrive the day after Nepal's King Birendra, his wife Queen Aishwarya, and eight more royal family members had been assassinated in their royal palace in Kathmandu during a family dinner.⁵ While no country is totally prepared for such catastrophic events, it had been 550 years since such violent turmoil had rocked the reign of the monarchy in Nepal. Given that the King is revered as the incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, it is not an event for which such a country could prepare. However, a different but related danger presented itself immediately after we crossed the Friendship Bridge into Nepal, and was conceived some six months earlier during my visit to India and a day excursion into Nepal to see the birthplace of the Buddha (Limbini).

Our Nepalese guide met our group half way across the bridge and told us that chaos had overtaken Kathmandu. He suggested that we might consider staying outside the city for the four days we had planned to stay in Nepal. Before considering our options, we had to go through customs, and because I thought everyone had gotten proper visas in Tibet for a Nepalese entry, I anticipated a fast passage onward to Kathmandu, which was still a two and a half hour drive from the border. When I gave them my passport they seemed willing to stamp it and move me along like everyone else. However, one of the clerks noted that I had failed to get my Nepalese visa stamped with my exit when I departed from Nepal some months before, and informed me that I had violated Nepalese law and they would be holding my passport until proper legal charges could be addressed. My guide told me that given the state of emergency in Nepal, this could not be a worse time to be in trouble with the law and most likely I would be incarcerated in a Nepalese jail and eventually be taken before a judge. However, this could be weeks if not months due to the chaos in the capital.

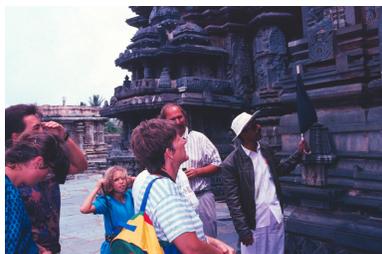
At this juncture, our Nepalese guide and my friend, Sonam, took the lead and motioned the head customs official toward a back room where they proceeded to argue for at least 20 minutes before Sonam exited and told me to come outside as he had important matters to discuss. He looked me in the eye and said after much negotiation that the top customs supervisor had agreed to receive a "fee" of \$500 US given the state of emergency currently in Nepal. In exchange he would give me back my passport and let me go on my way. While I greeted this news with some relief, I knew that I did not have \$500 cash, as this was near the end of our trip. Sonam suggested that I approach my class participants to see if enough money could be raised to work out this deal. Otherwise, I had no choice but surrender myself to the Nepalese customs officials back at the border station.

As I began to walk back to the bus it dawned on me that these poor people had been sitting in the hot bus for over an hour already and probably would be all too willing to turn me over to the Nepalese jailer themselves. When I reached the bus I climbed into the front area of the bus and was greeted by my concerned students. My predicament had reached their ears through some of the other tour company assistants. I spoke to them softly and said that if I did not raise \$500 in the next ten minutes then I would be heading for an undisclosed Nepalese jail

where I would likely remain for the next few months if not a good deal longer. There was a sudden hush over the bus at which point I told them that I was almost out of cash and asked if anyone wanted to assist me. To my surprise and relief, a family who had come on the trip with their three children yelled out that they had \$500 and would lend it to me immediately. One of the parents rushed to the front of the bus with five crisp green \$100 bills in her hand and at that point there was spontaneous applause and I waved good bye and walked briskly back to the customs office as I felt an uncontrollable grin stretch across my face. My friend Sonam Ghale met me and I gave him the money, and he hopped up the wooden front steps, gathered the official, and went again into the back room. A few minutes later he walked out of the office with my passport in hand and together we ran down to the bus, hopped on, and with a cloud of choking diesel fumes, left this seedy border area.



Mountain Pass



Group Education



Tibet Road

Our dangers did not end here, for while I was out of immediate danger of jail, we still had to find our way into safe harbor for the next four days until our plane left Nepal for Hong Kong and then to Guam. After taking a stop at an upscale resort for a much-needed lunch on the way back to Kathmandu, we finally arrived in the city and headed for our hotel. Unfortunately, the city streets were filled with people walking aimlessly, so we had to be let off the bus some half-dozen blocks from our hotel and walk with our suitcases and belongs to our final destination. We managed to get to the actual street of the hotel, a mere 50 feet from the hotel; but we were blocked from crossing the street by a funeral procession for the slain royal family that had already begun. We were swarmed with local mourners and ended up holding onto each other and our luggage for some two hours while the convoy passed before us; when the bodies of the slain king and queen came by, there was a tidal wave of people that slammed into our group but within a half minute they passed onward with the bodies. Fortunately I had my digital camcorder with me, so I raised it above my head and was able to film most of the procession, a portion of which was used by the local TV news station upon return to Guam.

That evening, after the procession had finished, we were able to finally get to our hotel and eat a simple meal and thereafter turned in for the night. The next day I gave permission for two families within our group to move into nicer hotels nearby. They wanted to find more comfortable quarters for their children who, like all of us, had to stay within the confines of the hotel for the next three days while Martial Law was in effect. They were willing to pay the higher rates for the upgrade so I gave my blessing with the stipulation that they check in daily. Fortunately, Martial Law was lifted for most of that first day so we were at least able to hire some local cabs and go to several important sites.⁶ It was good that we took advantage of this opportunity, because others had evidently used that unrestricted time to plan protests for the next day over the crowning of the very unpopular King Gyanendra. Gyanendra is Birendra's younger brother who ascended to the throne after the murder of his brother. Martial Law was quickly restored within the country, but protests broke out in various parts of the city. We were merely two blocks from the royal palace where various groups of protesters had begun to gather.⁷

Riot police formed a human wall across the street in an effort to repel a large group of angry protesters who had started to march toward the palace from our area of town. The police resistance stopped the main group of protesters right in front of our hotel. We quickly moved to the rooftop café where we had a bird's eye view of all the hostilities below. The hotel officials locked the gate to the front entrance to our hotel, so we were relatively safe while witnessing one of the most violent days in Nepalese history. Police at the palace down the street killed at least six protesters, but no one was seriously injured in the crowd before us. However, matters between the crowd and police escalated as the day wore on. Initially, scatter guns were fired above the crowd to help disperse the crowd and when that eventually proved ineffective, tear gas cartridges were shot into the crowd. Tear gas fumes quickly rose up into our roof area and then down air shafts into our rooms. Hotel staff began to go room to room offering onion slices, which we were told to put under our noses to counteract the debilitating effect of the gas. This was a part of witnessing history that was not mentioned in the syllabus for the course nor welcomed by any of us.

Things calmed down the next day and we were actually quite bored in comparison to the earlier days, as no one was allowed on the street and no shops or offices were open throughout the capital. Entertainment material on the state-run TV was removed in respect for the fallen royal family. Only repetitive and vague news reports on the assassinations were broadcast as well as religious programming. Finally a bus came on the fourth morning. We all hopped aboard and were soon dropped off at the airport. As perhaps a final expression of this particularly eventful visit to Nepal, I got food poisoning from the meal served on the Royal Nepalese Airline departure flight, and ended up spending that night and the next day in Hong Kong vomiting and running a high fever. Somehow that night I managed to get on the airport-bound city bus with my belongings and then boarded my plane headed for Guam. I was never so glad to be home as when that plane landed, both for myself and for my group. No one kissed the ground when we arrived, but I think many of us thought about doing so.

This sort of unexpected danger is not something that I suspect I will ever encounter again. I was glad that things turned out fine other than missing some planned Nepalese activities. When I occasionally encounter members of that particular trip, the events in Nepal are what come up first as the most memorable and thrilling parts of the trip. This is not the kind of thing one plans for, but with a calm mind and the hiring of a good tour company, one can get through such trying times with a minimum amount of imminent danger. I paid back the generous family when we got to Hong Kong where I could generate some cash from my credit card. All's well that ends well, so would observe William Shakespeare on this memorable trip through Nepal.

Conclusion

Over the last fifteen years the University of Guam's Philosophy Program has offered PI 486, Travel Studies in Asia as an educational course to help students and community members gain a direct intensive exposure to Asian culture and philosophy. This course is invaluable for students who are specializing in Asian philosophy, though anyone can benefit from this unique opportunity to gain a direct encounter with a foreign country under the guidance of an expert in the culture and religion/philosophy of that particular country. It has been a learning experience for both student and instructor, for this instructor had no previous experience leading a travel group through distant lands. The courses improved as knowledge increased on both setting up the travel as well as understanding how best to deal with problems and threats as they presented themselves. The following points can be suggested as guidelines for either setting up a future academic course by other faculty members or accessing the safety and organizational strength of an academic travel course by prospect travelers.

First and foremost, it is important to work with a local travel company in the countries to be visited. Ask them for real and updated travel time estimates, road conditions, and secondary points of interest to visit along the way to break up the trip.⁸ Since most college trips are on a tight budget, it is likely that a majority of travel will be on a bus while plane and overnight train travel must be restricted to only large leaps across the country. The downside of this use of air travel is that many participants begin to accumulate souvenirs along the way; so it is not uncommon to be hit up with big overweight luggage charges that either must be paid in full or in part to a local official who will let the group luggage through. The level of quality of the local tour company is proportionate to the degree of safety afforded the group. Seek out well-established companies; attempt to get a higher-ranking company official to accompany the group. This will insure that the national guide for the trip has some political connections with the government and can get immediate assistance should dangers arise.

Second, once you and the travel company agree upon an itinerary and a suitable group trip rate (cost) is accepted, you must type up a well laid out itinerary for prospective travelers. This list also provides a sense of structure and stability during the trip itself. I find that giving a brief presentation about possible dangers (i.e., thieves in markets, loose rocks on trails, contracting diseases while traveling, getting lost in large crowds) makes participants act more responsibly and cuts down on incidents. These presentations, given either the night before or in the morning, also function to inform students about the sites to be traveled. This serves to keep the enthusiasm up and the grumbling down. Sometimes I make brief presentations followed by question and answer sessions while traveling on the bus, especially when the group gets closer to each destination. Yet these "mobile" sessions must be short due to the poor acoustics of the bus interior coupled with the rough ride due to bad road conditions.

Third, besides working hard to make sure that the trip is safe, well organized, documented, and focused on its educational value, a course organizer must ensure a reasonable level of comfort for the travelers on the trip. While a course membership composed of only well-seasoned, young student travelers might be agreeable to just about any type of food and accommodations, I never was given that sort of group; instead, I have found that most groups are anything but homogeneous. Most travel courses are peppered with older and "more fragile" participants who sign up with more traditional student counterparts. After the first couple of trips, I came to the conclusion that spending a little more to upgrade to safer, air conditioned buses (when needed), avoiding youth hostels and one star hotels

(unless unavoidable), and making sure there was some variance in the daily meals did wonders to help avoid potential psychological meltdowns and anticipate dangers. This is a balancing act for educational tours, as no one would join if you are booking four and five star hotels at \$150 a night; so you have to find a level of minimum comfort and try to avoid going below that point while at the same time trying hard not to float too high above that level which would inflate the cost of the trip. However, the most important consideration is always safety; there is no compromise for costs in dealing with the health and well being of the travel group.

Fourth, provide a detailed list of things to bring and not bring on the trip. I have a list of 30-40 such items I pass out before departure. I recommend things like antibiotics, aspirin, decongestives, diarrhea pills, insecticide spray, ear plugs, sun screen, sunglasses, a compact toilet paper roll, etc. These are items that have proved invaluable in the past but are usually overlooked- The more you can anticipate in terms of safety and creature comforts *before* the trip and identify to your students while preparing for the trip, the better the chances for increasing the trip's safety and stability as well as the cordiality of the participants. Some of these details will naturally be addressed by the tour company in going over the specifics of the travel arrangements and payment to them. However, awareness of many of these issues comes from years of experience on the road leading others.

Notes

¹ People in the travel industry often distinguish between two broad types of travelers who correspondingly seek two different types of travel tours: vacation and adventure tours. The former is sedentary and the mentality is no fuss, no hurry, stay on a simple itinerary and above all "kick back" and relax, spend long days at the beach or lodge doing nothing. Clearly this is not the approach taken in the philosophy trips. Some might interpret "adventure tours" as incorporating activities one might see on X-Games competition, e.g., trekking, repelling, white water rafting, skateboarding on ramps, motor cross, etc., but this is not necessarily the case and not the approach taken here. Yet, it would be fair to say that participants on the UOG philosophy trips are challenged mentally and physically, each day is filled with events that incorporate new cultural, religious, and philosophical activities that at once challenge and enrich.

² Rishikesh has been a location of spiritual development for centuries, with a host of recluses living up in the mountains directly above the lightly populated area below. The Ram Jhula pedestrian bridge that stretches over the Ganges River isolates one bank of the town from the other side where one can find small rustic hotels and automobile access. The "secluded" side is lined by a series of ashrams of assorted swamis including the one we stayed with. At the end of this "guru row" of spiritual centers is the ashram of Maharishi Mash Yogi which brought worldwide attention to this location when he hosted [the Beatles](#) in 1968. The Beatles studied under the guidance of Maharishi and his western tailored version of meditation. Others followed, including the Beach Boys, Donovan, and a host of movie stars. Some of these celebrities still appear to practice the TM meditation technique they learned; however, the world spotlight and flow of aspirants from the west slowed down fairly quickly as Maharishi closed down his ashram to westerners and moved to Europe. Westerners are still seen trampling through the often muddy walkway through the small town of shops and ashrams; while a few might be there to study meditation, most are there as tourists, as Rishikesh has expanded its focus from a location of spiritual growth, to a tourist destination which includes among other things white water rafting on the sacred Ganges river. It is an extremely beautiful destination where the Ganges River begins, high among dense green Himalaya Mountains.

³ Rishikesh is the starting point for traveling to the sites that form the [Char Dham](#) pilgrimage — [Badrinath](#), [Kedarnath](#), [Gangotri](#), and [Yamunotri](#), with Badrinath being the most sacred and important of the four locations. Badrinath gains its immanence principally from a multitude of supreme references to it in scripture and literature for thousands of years as a holy place. For example the [Bhagavata Purana](#) notes, "There in Badrikashram, [Vishnu](#), in his incarnation as the sages [Nara and Narayana](#), had been undergoing great penance since time immemorial for the welfare of all living entities." ([Bhagavata Purana](#) 3.4.22)

⁴ It should be noted that reports of fatal accidents of tour buses along these steep and unprotected (i.e., no guard rails) mountain roads in India and elsewhere in the world were not totally new to me, as local, national, and international media provide news stories from time to time of these human tragedies. Yet, invariably, the accounts note that these bus tours were not registered with government officials, the buses were in poor condition and were severely overloaded with pilgrims overfilling the interior seating area as well as outside roof racks and even back bumpers. In some cases, no rescue efforts came about for days after the bus's tumble down the mountain side. While no mountain bus travel in third world countries can ever be completely safe, there are numerous safeguards that can be put in place—in contrast to the accident prone pilgrimages just noted—that allow for reasonably safe travel by international travel classes such as ours.

⁵ The Nepalese royal massacre occurred on Friday, [June 1, 2001](#), the day before our arrival in Nepal. It happened at the [Narayanhiy Royal Palace](#), the residence of [Nepalese monarchy](#). The prevailing account has Crown Prince [Dipendra](#) allegedly opening up fire on several members of his family at a family dinner. As a result of the shooting, ten people died and five were wounded. The dead included [King Birendra of Nepal](#) and [Queen Aiswarya](#), the King's daughter Princess Shrutu Rana, the King's cousin Princess Jayanti Shah, the King's youngest son, Prince Nirajan, the King's sisters Princesses Shanti Singh and Sharda Shah, and the King's brother-in-law Kumar Khadga Bikram Shah, the King's youngest brother Dhirendra, Gorakh Rana, husband of Princess Shrutu, and Princess Shova Shahi, the King's youngest sister. Prince Dipendra turned the automatic rifle upon himself and inflicted several gun wounds; yet while laying in a military hospital unconscious in critical condition, he became *de jure* King of Nepal upon his father's death three days later. The widely accepted motive for the killings is that Prince Dipendra was angry over his parent's unwillingness to accept Dipendra's choice of bride, [Devyani Rana](#), daughter of Pashupati SJB Rana, a member of the [Rana](#) clan, against whom the [Shah dynasty](#) have a historic animosity. See <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2001/20010603/main1.htm>

⁶ During our mad dash around the capital city of Kathmandu, we were able to visit the Bodhnath Stupa (largest and most famous Buddhist stupa with eyes looking in all directions on the face of the stupa), the Swayambhunath temple on top of a hill with a long set of stairs, and the city of Bhaktapur, a medieval town that has been beautifully restored and cleaned by a generous grant from the Western German government in the 1970s. We headed for the culturally and philosophically significant sites at the expense of the more recreational and leisure destinations. Little opportunity was available for shopping, sampling of the Kathmandu night life and array of nice restaurants, as well as a planned elephant safari through the Royal Chitwan National Park. However, given that shops, night clubs, restaurants, and parks were closed for eighteen days after the assassination of the royal family, it is something that we couldn't have enjoyed even if we had not gone to the sites mentioned.

⁷ Some people in Nepal, including most of the street protesters, suspected that [Gyanendra](#) was responsible for the royal palace massacre and that he had blamed Dipendra so that he could assume the throne himself. Gyanendra was very unpopular in Nepal, fueled by the carefree and unlawful activities of his son, who we were told had driven into a pedestrian one night when he was drunk and never was prosecuted for the death. Gyanendra was out of town in [Pokhara](#) during the massacre though his wife and son were in the room at the royal palace during the massacre, surviving with only minor injuries, further fueling the suspicion of his involvement in the mass assassination of the current royal family. Further feeding the rumor of his involvement was the allegation that Dipendra was mortally wounded by a gunshot to the left side of the head, while Dipendra was right-handed. Some believe that this casts doubt on whether the injury was self-inflicted. Our brief interaction with protestors on the street found people in great despair and grief, arguing that they could not believe that Prince Dipendra could do such a dastardly act against his own beloved family. In spite of two government investigations that both concluded that Prince Dipendra was the sole gunman, as well as a BBC documentary that reached the same conclusion, conspiracy theories persist. Recently, a book was published in Nepal named *Raktakunda* recounting the massacre and citing a man who claims he was involved in the assassination himself and that Prince Dipendra had nothing to do with the killing of his own family. Though neither new "revelations" have been taken seriously by the existing government or other governments outside of Nepal, such material only continued to fuel hatred and mistrust toward the government. One thing that does remain certain is that the assassination of the Royal family and the assent of King Gyanendra to the thrown marked the doom of the monarchy in Nepal such that he was forced to give full power to parliament in April 2006 and take on the status of only being a ceremonial monarch. King Gyanendra continued to assume that role until May 2008 when he was peacefully deposed and Nepal became a federal republic.

⁸ One should keep in mind that Asian tour companies are used to arranging tours for Asian tourists who tend to travel more "intensely," i.e., visiting the maximum number of sites visited in a day, which entails long days of bus travel. This stoic demeanor is not prevalent amongst western travelers, no matter how young, so you need to keep checking the itinerary and reminding the tour company that you are a group of western travelers. They generally will agree with you and even ask you from time to time if you wish to include a day off, a "free day" to allow travelers to unwind, shop, and relax. You may wish to include these days, though I have usually tried to avoid them as time is precious, your travelers have paid a lot of money to go overseas, and there is a lot of territory to cover in a limited time. Instead, I try to schedule in "fun" or "recreational" events during the week, where we can go on a camel back ride in the desert or an elephant safari in a park reserve, and discover important things while still doing something out of the ordinary.