Thailand by the Tail: Adrift on the Andaman Coast

The Killer Cats of Nepal: On the Trail of a Man-Eater

Jamming in the Caribbean: Trinidad’s Carnival Blowout

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Lose Weight Fast

If life wasn’t so complicated, it’d be easy. And more like travel. The road is one of the world’s best reducing agents, clearing out the clutter and stacks and tangles of stuff that keep us all, well, complicated. I love the realization a few days into a trip that everything I need is in my pack, that all the things I think I need I don’t need. I feel a sudden overnight weight loss, a splendid lightness of being, as all extraneous baggage ceases and desists from piling on, and suddenly it’s very elemental—just me and my atoms of discovery.

I’m always amazed how easily I can do without the necessities—microwave, TV, the news, pound cake. When it’s not around, you just don’t miss it. Of course there is something missing: the static of keeping up and getting ahead that bombards us with a permanent psychic decibel level equivalent to a front row seat for Black Sabbath. We don’t even know it’s there until it’s not there, and that’s when the lightness comes in. Travel shuts off the noise, replacing it with the supremely still clarity of the undistracted moment.

We’ve got a lot of those moments this issue, a summer’s worth of trips that will take the pounds off. They’re times when “the present catches up with you,” as Jordy Tanzer puts it in his story (p. 40) on the bargain tropical adventure capital of the world, the Thai peninsula. He experiences this sublime sensation as the weight of past and future melts off in a jungle swimming hole and in the lightness of a magical mystery island called a hong. It’s all part of his swing down the tail of Thailand, a crossroads for traders and tin miners, Malays, Chinese, Tamils and Indonesians—and travelers in search of tropical isles. He finds a few of those, along with some manic bus attendants, plus sea kayaking and jungle adventures, at prices you’ll just have to take our word on. Dinner for three: $5.00. Beach bungalow on Ko Lanta Island: $3.49 a night. Are you packing yet? By the way, you’ll be seeing more of Jordy in these pages. Formerly of Toronto and the film world, he’s joined the ESCAPE team as senior editor.

SEE SPOTS KILL. Late last year I saw a two-line wire-service blurb in the paper that I couldn’t believe. Like some Kipling flashback, a tiger had killed 100 people in a Nepali village. I contacted the peripatetic Karen Catchpole, a New York writer who was traveling in Nepal, and asked her to check it out. There was no tiger, but there was an animal considered more lethal and cunning: a hungry leopard—with buddies. Catchpole followed the tracks to a village on Nepal’s western border for “The Killer Cats of Kulu” (p. 50), a fascinating look at the still live and dangerous catt-human contest as civilization encroaches on the wilds.

SLIPPING AND SLIDING. Follow the steel pans to music-mad Trinidad and Tobago with new contributing editor, guitarist and calypso aficionado Chuck Thompson. A former editor at American Way, he plunges into Carnival, the hemisphere’s second biggest party, and keeps on going, exploring the parade of wildlife in the hills of the Northern Range. Meanwhile, Dennis Lewon shimmies through the hallucinatory slot canyons of Utah’s Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument. Dennis, who has a book on hiking in northern California due out next year, also joins us as a contributing editor.

That’s it for this trip. It’s time to lighten up. I’ll see you down the road.

Joe Robinson
Editor & Publisher
The Killer Cats of Kulau

After a spree that killed 100 people, Nepal’s most dangerous man-eating leopard is finally dead. Unfortunately, he had friends. Checking frequently over her shoulder, our correspondent follows the paw prints to the leopard’s den of Kulau. —By Karen Catchpole

When 13-year-old Nirmala Kumari Tripathi’s candle blew out one night last January, she went next door to her aunt’s house to get a match so she could finish studying. As she crossed the packed dirt courtyard that separates the two tiny mud-walled dwellings, she heard a low growl but thought it was just another of the area’s many feral house cats. It wasn’t.

“The leopard grabbed me by the neck and threw me into the courtyard,” she tells me in a soft voice. “First it tried to carry me up a tree, but it couldn’t, so it dragged me into a field below our house.” She doesn’t remember much after that, because she passed out moments before her father and grandmother rescued her.

“My friends were really happy that I survived,” she says, absently fingering three distinct claw scars on the left side of her long neck. “They say I must have had a spare life saved up.”

You need a few spares these days in Kulau, a place where virtually every family has a similar story of assault by the man-eater. Last November, three-year-old Adha Kumar Chand was found by villagers in a nearby forest. She’d been devoured from the waist down. In July, Dhani Datta Bhatta, 18, was confronted by the leopard on his way home alone. He survived but was so frightened that he left his village and moved to the district headquarters in Baitadi.

Like something out of a dusty Kipling yarn, man-eaters roam the night in western Nepal, and stalked villagers find themselves about as vulnerable as their 19th-century counterparts. The government’s official policy is to hunt the cats down, capture them alive and relocate them—usually to one of the country’s national parks. Three shikaris, or hunters, are kept armed and ready for the job at the palace in Kathmandu. Expert marksmen from a caste left over from the long-lost days when the king routinely went out on hunting safaris, the shikaris can usually kill a man-eater within a few days. The trouble is, they’re not often deployed beyond the Kathmandu area.

So Kulau, 450 miles from the capital, closer to Delhi than Kathmandu, is on its own, which may explain why this record-breaking predator survived for so long. The 230-pound cat’s four-year rampage shocked and terrified even the old-timers, racking up more than 100 human deaths and at least as many maulings, plus a tally of countless cattle.

“If the estimates of the number dead in Kulau are correct, this is the worst man-eater problem we’ve ever had,” confirms Baitadi district forest officer K.K. Shrestha. Though he admits to being woefully out of touch with what’s really going on in the far-flung nooks and crannies of his district, Shrestha says his colleagues around Baitadi routinely report being “troubled” by one or two leopards each year. But no cat has ever unleashed a spree like the killer cat of Kulau.
Wait Until Dark. The hill country of Kulau, far from anywhere, especially when night falls.

As reports of the man-eater’s exploits found their way into newspapers and conversations in Kathmandu, a base for my travels in Asia, I became increasingly fascinated. How, at the dawn of the 21st century, could a single animal terrorize and outwit humans for so long? The answers were obviously not to be found in the relative safety of the capital, so I set out for the distant ranges of western Nepal, armed only with the not-too-fearsome Raj Kumari Mahatran, my translator and guide to remote cat country.

And remote is the word. After three days of travel by plane, bus and jeep from Kathmandu, we had only reached Baitadi city. The cat den of Kulau was still two days’ hard walk away. Very little of Nepal’s terrain is flat, but its middle hills are especially brutal. Each eight-hour day of trekking was an exhausting 2,000- to 3,000-foot ascent followed by a disheartening descent, only to be repeated all over again. Luckily, the scenery—sweeping, connect-the-dots panoramic views of the Nepali and Indian Himalaya—took our minds off the exertion during the 25-mile trek.

Still, by the end of our first day of walking, we were all glad when we finally made it to our bivouac for the night, a tiny tea shop along the trail. For dinner, we had the usual daal bhaat, a surprisingly tasty combination of daal (lentils), bhaat (rice) and curried vegetables (when you’re lucky or, as we were, guests of honor). Daal bhat is the official dish of Nepal, and many Nepalis eat little else their entire lives.

Dinner conversation strayed far from the usual, courtesy of a man named Ganesh. I say a man named Ganesh, but after a night of eating and talking with the half-Indian, half-Nepali, roly-poly, droopy-eared, smiley-faced, big-nosed, preternaturally optimistic man, I’m pretty much convinced that what I met was a human manifestation of the elephant-headed Hindu god of prosperity who shares his name.

I was given the straw bed in the crawl space above the communal room where we’d eaten dinner. Raj Kumari, though, was a trickier issue. As a good Hindu woman, she would not be allowed to spend the night in a room where men she’s not related to have slept. Much to her relief, she was invited to sleep with the owner’s wife, mother and sister in the “women only” room in a house up the hill. We were all so exhausted, we could have slept anywhere out of leopard range.

Located in dense jungle just five miles from the Indian border, the Kulau Village Development Committee area is a leopard paradise—plenty of cover, clean water, but just one little problem: not enough to eat. The growing human population in the area has encroached on the food and land supply, all but wiping out the once plentiful indigenous deer population.

During my week on the trails in the area I saw no hoofprints. Paw prints, though, were in full supply. On the way to Kulau, I saw alarmingly large piles of scat and territorial claw scratchings on the ground that looked like skid marks from a hastily departing Harley Nepali wildlife experts say the leopard population is skyrocketing.

While beleaguered Bengal tigers languish just above the 200 mark, leopards are believed to number in the thousands.

The reason, according to experts, is that leopards are very flexible cats. “The common leopard is an extremely adaptable predator, capable of living in very close proximity to people, and often goes largely undetected,” says Rodney Jackson of the International Snow Leopard Trust, which tracks the endangered mountain cousin of the Kulau cats. Leopards can survive on small game and livestock and need only minimal cover.
Why would a cat make the switch to dining on people? Old age or injury can prevent a leopard from effectively taking down wild prey, forcing it to turn to easier domestic targets, but Kula's high concentration of leopards coupled with the lack of natural prey is almost certainly what made the relatively young and healthy male leopard there resort to hunting the only thing left on the menu: humans.

By the end of the second day's walk, I could see the ridge above Kula in the distance. Thoughts of devoured infants and nearby scat made me more and more anxious to be off the trail. Unlike tigers, which are known to hunt during all hours of the day and night, leopards prefer to dine between dusk and dawn. As darkness inched toward us over the Himalayas, every overhanging bank, thicket of underbrush and blind corner was transformed into the perfect hideout for a hungry leopard.

I knew that even a man-eater will not attack a group of two or more grown humans. They are still essentially afraid of us and tend to target children and the elderly. But there's not much logic on a dark dirt path in the Nepali wilds. It was my first taste of the kind of terror the people of Kula had been living with for four long years, until last Halloween night.

That's when Jaya Bahadur Chand, 34, did what the Nepalese army and police force couldn't. Tipped off by a fellow villager that the cat had taken a cow that morning, Chand found the fresh kill and staked it out. Marlin Perkins style, in a deep ravine a few minutes walk from his house. Three hours later, as darkness fell, the leopard returned to eat. Face-to-face with the man-eater, the shy, skinny farmer fired the single shot in his 50-year-old, handmade flintlock rifle from 30 feet away.

Fueled by a desire for revenge, Chand swears he wasn't scared until the wounded 6-foot-10-inch animal began to scream and crash through the dense undergrowth. Fumbling to reload, Chand finally fired again, finishing off the man-eater with a shot through its stomach.

Yet even as Chand is feted by the 3,500 people living in the nine villages that make up Kula, the killings continue. A month later, another man-eater attacked at least four more humans in the area, resulting in two deaths and two more child maimings.

But Kula's latest spate of killings may be as personal as it is practical. Villagers believe the animal preying on them now is the female mate—possibly with cubs—of the male Chand shot in October. "She's angry," locals say. And they're scared.

Leopards are particularly efficient killers, using all four claw-wielding paws (tigers use two) to attack victims. And they're cunning, waiting on roofs and lurking in courtyards.

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**The People's Posse**

**Cats with a Taste for Humans** are nothing new in the hill country of western Nepal and adjacent forests in India. Early in the century, India's Champawat tiger killed 486 people before it was stopped by a man who came to embody all the adventure and ambivalence of big cat-human conflict on the subcontinent: British hunter and outdoorsman Jim Corbett.

From 1906 until 1941 Corbett stalked the cats that stalked villagers in India's northeastern wilds, killing a dozen of the most notorious attackers—responsible for the deaths of more than 1,500 people. His exploits won him fame as the greatest tracker in India and godlike status from those he rescued from the dinner menu. But he took no joy in killing the animals and wasn't in it for the bravado. He did it only to save the lives of rural Indians he felt a special bond with. As he once wrote, "I am amply rewarded if my hunting has resulted in saving one human life."

Born in the Indian hill station of Naini Tal to a postmaster of the British Raj, Corbett grew up in the forest country of Kaladhungi, where he became a crack shot and learned the ways of the jungle. His cat-tracking days only began, though, after a long career with India's railways. Prodded by local British officials and begged by villagers, the reluctant Corbett took to the forest in his forties in search of the most notorious beasts of the day. On the trail of a killer, he would push himself to the limit, covering up to 25 miles a day, going without food, sleeping near tiger kills and enduring stakeouts in trees for days. Near collapse after one punishing ten-week stretch, Corbett needed three months to recuperate before rejoining the hunt. He shot one man-eater, which had killed 150 people, while reeling from an errant rifle blast that punctured an eardrum.

In a series of popular books that began with his bestseller, *The Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, Corbett insisted that the rogue cats were anomalies, that they had adopted an alien diet only out of stress—"in nine cases out of ten, wounds, and in the tenth, old age." An ardent conservation advocate, he lobbied for India's first national park in the tiger-filled Kumaon Hills, today called Corbett National Park.
and terraced fields to snag anything that moves between sundown and sun-up. So no one does. Between 5 P.M. and 7 A.M. no resident of Kulau goes outside for fear of being taken by the latest killer cat.

Few villagers are more painfully aware of the threat than Dro Pati Bhatta. In August her 10-year-old niece, Komati—who lives in an adjacent house—was pounced on by the leopard at 7 P.M., when she unwittingly stepped out the front door to wash her legs before going to bed. The cat, waiting patiently on the family's roof, threw the tiny girl into the courtyard and dragged her into the family's terraced fields before her screams summoned adults, who frightened the leopard away.

The child was lucky to escape with just the tooth and claw scars she shyly reveals on her abdomen and lower back. Two months later, on October 13, Dro Pati's 11-year-old daughter, Tara Kumari, became the final victim of the male leopard that Chand shot. While cutting grass at dusk to feed the family's extremely nervous cattle, goats and water buffalo, Tara was attacked and severely mauled on the left side of her face, neck, shoulder and lower back. Two teenage girls out working with her were able to frighten the cat off, and the injured girl was carried back to her home.

The scantily stocked health post in Kulau couldn't save her with expired ibuprofen and glucose injections, so Tara and her father—accompanied by 20 villagers who took turns carrying the injured girl on a homemade bamboo stretcher—embarked on a three-day overland journey to Delhi, where Tara is still in the hospital trying to regain the use of her left arm and hand.

Like dozens of other mauled children living in Kulau, Komati and Nirmala have nightmares about leopards almost every night. But at least they sleep. For Tara's mother, sleep is impossible. She's too busy listening in the dark to every noise, every movement. "After Jaya Chand killed the leopard we felt better for a few days. But then the attacks started again," the haggard woman says simply between sobs. "I feel this is a very dangerous place to live. But where would I go?"

That's a very good question. Kulau is only 50 miles, as the leopard walks, from the cat country of Naini Tal, in the foothills of the Garhwal Himalaya of India—where the legendary Jim Corbett conducted epic duels with notorious man-eaters in the early part of the century. Though most of his quarry were tigers, his toughest opponent was the Rudraprayag leopard, which killed more than 150 people between 1918 and 1926 before Corbett tracked it down and shot it. This lethal cat was an example of just how menacing a leopard rampage could be. It had started its spree preying on people who slept outdoors, then began leaping through open windows before finally clawing through the mud-hut walls of village dwellings to get at its victims.

Humans and wild animals live side by side in many parts of Nepal. Even as Chand was eliminating Kulau's public enemy number one, a female leopard was terrorizing Melamichi village—a scant 50 miles from Kathmandu—amassing six gruesome deaths over 12 months.

Meanwhile, a leopard pounced on the back of Deviki Bhatta, 60, in her yard in Damar Kholi, two miles from Baitadi. The grandmother was able to wound the young animal's foreleg with her sickle before she tumbled down the terraced hillside and passed out. Although it was the village men who eventually came and bludgeoned the cat to death, Deviki swears it was the gods—Shiva, in fact—who saved her from the bagh.

The Nepali word for leopard is chitwa, but no one uses it. In Nepal, all big cats are called bagh, or tiger, whether they have spots or stripes. As much as Nepalis fear both bagh with stripes and bagh with spots, positive images of big cats permeate the culture, from Tiger Balm to Tiger Beer. A tiger appears on the 500-rupee note—though the leopard only warrants the lowly two-rupee bill. Children and adults spend hours under village nepol trees playing the board game bagh chal ("moving the tiger"), which pits goats against tigers in a contest to the death. A Nepali adage holds that "a bold son is spared by the tiger."

Part of the reason for this love-hate relationship is the belief that both tigers and leopards are symbols of strength and good luck, and capable of imparting these qualities to humans. The animals' whiskers are particularly coveted. Possession of
It sounded much, much closer, and for 45 minutes a handful of jaded villagers and one mesmerized (but slightly nervous) journalist strained eyes and ears, excited by the cat's presence but anxious to make sure it was heading in the other direction. As dusk came, the cat finally disappeared over a far foothill toward a neighboring village already warned of the slowly approaching danger by an impressive relay of shouts from ridge to ridge in what locals refer to as the "Kulau telephone." I was as disappointed by the cat's departure as I was relieved.

Mud (whose ancient name is Moth, or "house of God") escaped again, thanks to connections with higher authorities than those in Kathmandu. A highly superstitious area, Mud is a place where weeklong drum pujas are still performed to calm those believed to have been possessed by evil spirits, and where jhakari, or witch doctors, are routinely consulted in times of illness, conflict or trouble.

Before deciding to kill the leopard, Chand walked from his nearby village to Mud to consult the local jhakari. He wanted to be sure that killing the animal would not enrage Durga, the fierce Hindu goddess of power, who rides a tiger. The jhakari eventually gave Chand the go-ahead, prophesying that he'd do it within three months.

After the leopard's death, Chand dutifully brought the carcass to the Somnath temple, where it was blessed with a tiha (the bright red Hindu mark symbolizing the third eye in the middle of the forehead) and a garland of sacred marigolds. As a relative of Durga's holy tiger, even a spotted man-eater merits a proper send-off.

"He is the king of the jungle and deserves respect," explains Somnath temple priest Utam Raj Kalauni, who attached himself to me after the leopard-viewing party broke up. During hours of storytelling in the candlelit attic I was sleeping in, Kalauni told me he believes the best weapon in the ongoing conflict between man and man-eater is devotion. He even practices what he preaches.

"I don't have a gun. I don't have a stick," Kalauni told me. "I just say 'God protect me.'" He is either exceedingly lucky or exceedingly right. Eight months ago the priest went into the jungle for ablutions before going to bed. He carried a vessel of water and a flashlight. While squatting in the undergrowth, he saw what appeared to be two flashlights coming toward him. He asked who was there shining lights on him during such a private moment but got no reply. When he picked up his own flashlight, the beam revealed a leopard less than 15 feet away. "I could see it licking its whiskers."

Before a predawn puja at the temple two years ago, Kalauni practically tripped over a leopard sleeping at the inner shrine, and he swears he's seen it "praying" in the same spot.

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But now Kalauni is worried that all is not well. Last summer a leopard walked right through the back door of a village house where a woman was feeding her infant son. The cat miraculously strolled past the woman and child and out the door again. Kalauni believes it was a warning.

The problem, he says, is that all leopard skins must be housed in the temple in order to appease the gods and ensure future safety from attacks, but Chand's male leopard was taken to Baitadi, then sent on to the palace in Kathmandu, eventually to end up in the museum per official government policy.

The jhakari of Mud confirmed that without the animal's pelt the villagers' safety could no longer be guaranteed. He also revealed that the area has not one but seven more leopards to contend with.

"The gods are not happy," Kalauni says somberly, then disappears, unarmed, into the night.

Not that the modern Nepali officials pushing pencils around in the big city care much what shamans have to say about who's allowed to kill what, or where valuable animal pelts should be kept. They have their own views on the matter. Since the creation of Project Tiger in India and other tiger conservation efforts in the '70s, Nepal has banned the hunting of big cats, although the king still goes after them once a year and a permit to hunt leopards for sport can be purchased by anyone with enough rupees. To thwart would-be poachers, the penalty for killing a tiger or leopard—even a man-eating one—without official permission is a still rupee fine equivalent to $85 to $255 ($850 is the average annual household income in Nepal) and one to three years in jail. But getting the official permission from authorities can take almost as long.

First the animal must be confirmed as a bona fide man-eater, which means at least one human must have been attacked. After the chief district officer—sometimes many days' walk away from where the problem is—agrees that the animal is a menace, it is left to his discretion to issue permission to use firearms or not. After this first stretch of red tape, the hunting procedure is often just as inefficient. When the job is finally green-lighted, the official order of operations requires that the first shot be given to terrified and inexperienced army and police personnel—who are invariably unsuccessful. Eventually a shikari is sent in or villagers are finally allowed to take matters into their own hands. And that's assuming there's a gun among them. The whole process can take months and cost dozens of lives.

Chand says he and his flintlock are ready to shoot the troublesome mate of the male he killed in October as well as any future man-eaters that enter his village—but not until the government (and the jhakari) give him official permission. In the meantime, villagers in Kulau continue to go to bed early.

Former New York-based magazine editor Karen Catchpole got the travel bug a few years ago, badly, and is deep into a second year-long Asian swing. She and her laptop are currently thought to be roaming somewhere in northern Vietnam.

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