

On the ROOOF of the world



Photographer and cameraman
ALAN BENNETT took the high
road, enduring tough physical
challenges and a rarefied
atmosphere to sample the
giddy pleasures of Nepal's
Himalaya Region.



Main picture: View of the Annapurna Mountains (Nikkita X100, 30mm lens; Fuji Velvia and ND grad filter).
Above: Nye microchip and his multi-coloured bowls at Bamsaghat, Kathmandu (Nikkita X100, 24mm lens; Fuji Velvia).
Left: Spinning prayer wheel at Bodhiathar Kathmandu, a religious centre for Tibetan and Nepalese Buddhists - (Nikkita X100, 24mm lens; Fuji Velvia).



Above: The correct strength of lens is determined for this patient's spectacles. Tilganga Eye Hospital, Kathmandu. (Minolta X700, 24mm lens Kodak T-Max 3200 film.)

Right: A traditional Nepalese method of pressurising the eye with a 300g weight for 20 minutes prior to surgery. Tilganga Eye Hospital, Kathmandu. (Minolta X700, 50mm lens Kodak T-Max 3200 film.)

the all-important camera gear is easy and comfort is first rate.

Lowepr and **Tamrac** (amongst others) manufacture a range of these types of holdall but to make sure you get the right one, fill it up with the gear you plan to take and try it on - before you buy. (I opted for the Lowepr "Off-Road" model, which I used with waist belt and shoulder strap for extra stability and comfort when walking over rough tracks.)

In The Bag

The golden rule for hiking photographers is to travel light. So, are power-winders really necessary? Do you need a big flashgun or those 20 special effect filters? Be strict with yourself and you'll be glad of it later.

Lugging a heavy camera system is not a good idea at high altitudes and although 35mm gear is the most practical, some medium format systems are just as light (the Mamiya 6 springs to

mind). Take a second body (if you have one) as a backup should one malfunction (you can use the second for a different film stock) because, in Nepal, your chances of getting anything photographic repaired are NIL!

Along with my two Minolta bodies (an X500 and an X700), I took a Minolta MD 24mm as well as 35mm, 50mm and 70-210mm lenses - though a 24-70mm and a 70-300mm zoom would have covered all eventualities (if I'd had them!). Once you are on the road lenses quickly become plagued by dust and grime - so pack a cleaning kit (consisting of a dust blower and lens cloth, small stiff brush, cotton buds and jewellers screwdriver) and spend time *every day* giving your gear the "once over". Preventative maintenance is the only form of repair available once you are in the wilds!

For special effects, a gradual ND

filter is an important accessory - without altering the actual colour of a scene, it helps to even out the exposure between the bright sky and the relatively darker land mass in the foreground. This avoids a burnt out, featureless looking sky (if exposing for the foreground) or a dark underexposed foreground (if metering off the sky). These "grads" are available from distributors such as S.C. Filters, Cokin, HiTech and Lee.

If shooting black-and-white film carry a dark red or orange filter to create dramatic skies. A green filter is good for lightening tones in foliage. Always pack spare batteries. Lithium cells are reliable performers in the cold (at *Thorung La Pass* my Minolta X500 operated without a problem in the freezing conditions). I also threw in a disposable panoramic camera - great for getting a "sense of place" when a regular 24mm SLR lens is just not "panoramic" enough!

Many people fret about what film to take on a trip - I packed rolls of Fuji Velvia and 400 ISO Kodak T-Max. Velvia is a slow transparency film with a nominal rating of ISO 50 giving stunning colour saturation and extremely fine grained images (I rated the Velvia at ISO 64, underexposing it one third of a stop to give it a little extra "punch".

Evening light on Nilgiri (6940m) in the Annapurna region. (Minolta X500, 70-210mm lens, Fuji Velvia rated at ISO 64.)

The black-and-white Kodak T-Max also has very fine grain - its faster sensitivity means that you can select higher shutter speeds - useful when you are shooting with a long telephoto lens (which exaggerates movement and therefore makes camera shake more noticeable).

Kodak T-Max 3200 is very fast black-and-white film and is ideal for shooting in dimly-lit interiors - I used this at the *Tilganga Eye Centre* in Kathmandu and produced interesting, documentary-style pictures - so pack a roll or two in your bag.

(All these films have



subsequently produced good 16x20 inch enlargements for an exhibition.)

The Annapurna Circuit is a three week trek which passes through many settlements so you are bound to shoot a lot of film. I found that the best way to remember what was what once back in Australia was to label each film as it is finished and to keep notes on your subject matter (such as the name of a Buddhist monastery, the height of mountain peaks, the names of the crops being harvested and so on - all this information will only help when it comes to hanging, projecting or publishing the photos).

Tripods are useful accessories to carry but they are heavy and cumbersome at the best of times - if you decide to lighten the load, become resourceful; search for natural supports like boulders and branches, and man-made ones like fences and tables to provide extra support for your camera.

Nepalese children are very photogenic - they are wonderful subjects but be aware that they do expect gifts in return for your award-winning portraits! Trekkers often hand out sweets but as dentists are few and far between in Nepal, ball point pens (for school) make an acceptable alternative.