

## Party on the piste

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# TRAVEL

## ON SUNDAY

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## Having a ball in Nepal

Soccer or scenery? **James Hanning** finds both on a Himalayan adventure with a difference

NEPAL

# Possibly the best football pitch in the world

With his 'not-bad pub team' and family in tow, **James Hanning** discovers the drama of this spectacular Himalayan kingdom

For several years, I have been telling my family that this year will be the last year. Yes, boys' holidays should be a thing of the past. Yes, we're too old to be seeing old friends more than fleetingly and more than once a year (it's called middle age), let alone playing football (our average age is over 50), let alone in some of the world's hottest – politically and meteorologically – places. But it's just so much fun.

We (aka the Racing Club de Blackheath, a group of friends from south-east London) started doing the odd tour in the 1980s, and having seen much of Eastern and Western Europe by the end of the last millennium, we raised our gaze to take in Cuba, Lebanon, Iran, Pakistan, Syria, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan.

We used to say our standard was that of "a not-bad pub team", but we realised just how badly that term travels when, in Iran, under the gaze of state-inspired banners proclaiming the infallibility of the mullahs, we didn't touch the ball for the first 10 minutes of one game. It turned out we were playing a team of former internationals. Now that we have given up pretending we're not veterans, we have been humiliated on foreign fields less often. We even win sometimes, if the opposition is old/hopeless/polite enough. But like those unsatisfactory middle-aged men you see at airports preparing to fly to Bangkok, we now have to travel a long, long way to find locals who will even consider lying down for us.

So, this time (the last, again), at what I thought would be a moment of low resistance, I told my wife and daughters (aged seven and 10) that a friend of a friend had fixed a tour to Nepal. To my amazement, for the first time ever they said they wanted to come too. So they did (they're like that) and it was the best holiday we've ever had.

The Nepal bug was catching. Word spread among the Wags (which doesn't yet stand for Wives and Grandchildren, but soon will). We would be "going out on a high", and there ended up being 35 of us.

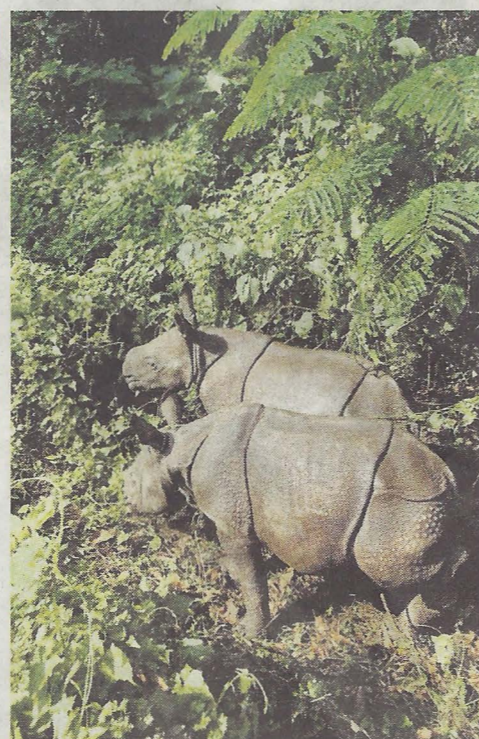
Our itinerary was worked out, as ever, by our captain, who produced as magnificent a combination of trekking, sightseeing, simple human bonding and football, as you could ever ask for. After flying to Kathmandu, pausing only for a couple of nights and a game in the outskirts, we took a 30-minute flight east to Tumlingtar, and the world's bumpiest 4x4 ride up to a tented village surrounding a Buddhist temple up the road from the mountain village of Khadbari.

The next three days were spent eating the freshest Nepalese food, being bowled over by the selfless charm and humility (yes, everyone says that, but it's true) of the local population, walking in extreme heat while admiring stupendous views of oranges, lemons, grapefruit, millet, chilli and coffee fields and of Mount Makalu, the world's fifth-highest mountain, just 14 miles east of Everest – and playing football.

The first game in the hills was against a local gorkha team, on what might be called an infinity pitch. While essentially flat, to our surprise, given the vertiginous mountains surrounding it, the touchline on one side was a steep drop towards who knows what swirling mysteries below. To add to the fun, the halfway line contained a ravine-like heffalump trap, giving new meaning to the idea of playing "in the hole".

It would be an exaggeration to say we enjoyed all mood cons, though it wasn't for lack of effort by our hosts, who laid on water butts for a refreshing early-morning splash. We were sleeping (if lucky) in tents in the grounds of a small temple, feeding on outstanding freshly cooked local meat and veg arranged by our assiduous hosts. Nobody minded the implicit grubbiness that goes with trekking and camping – which comes to feel like a patina of heroism – such was the feeling that we were part of something really extraordinary in one of the most remote places imaginable. Even those returning late-night to the camp fire after their tum with the loo roll affected the unshowy pride of the adventurer for whom the bare-hands slaying of a mountain bear was nothing, really.

We had been treated marvellously by the hosts for our previous game



**TRAVEL ESSENTIALS**  
Audley (01993 838 315; audleytravel.com) offers a 14-day "Discover Nepal" itinerary, including Kathmandu, trekking in the Annapurna region and a stay at the Eco Wildlife Lodge (ecowildlifelodge.com) at Chitwan National Park from £2,475pp, including international and internal flights, transfers, all accommodation and most meals.

**MORE INFORMATION**  
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**FIELD OF DREAMS**  
Clockwise from main: the 'infinity pitch'; Chitwan National Park; two rhinos; the Racing Club de Blackheath, plus opposition (James Hanning in front row, far right)  
ALAMY; AFP/GETTY

in Kathmandu, but two games in the Himalayas – one in the shade of one of the world's tallest mountains – in front of wildly enthusiastic fans, was something else. We met wonderfully kind and delightful people in Nepal, and were reminded, in cliché-defying style, that Western materialism sucks. Nepal is very poor – the 15th poorest country in the world – but what a humbling, mind-broadening example of how upliftingly, inspiringly, smilingly different life can be. The people noticeably lack Western attitudes to sanitation and litter, but that should prevent no one with the faintest sense of the wonder of nature from visiting. What could be more invigorating than a trek in the Himalayas?

One answer might be a stay on one of Nepal's national parks, which is how my family and I spent another week in the country. That, too, required a bit of roughing it, but more in the getting there than the being there. On the map, the Chitwan National Park is about 60 miles from Kathmandu, southwards, and just 20 miles from the Indian border. On the clock, it is

about six hours on possibly the world's worst road to warrant the title "the nation's main highway". You can fly, but you'd miss the spectacular drive through a ravine, where folks go rafting on the chalk-filled River Trivuli (if you can tear your eyes from the hair-raising road surface).

Once in Chitwan, you're in heaven. It is about 400sq miles of thick subtropical lowlands. In 1973, much of it became the country's first national park. Twenty-three years later, 300sq miles surrounding the park was declared a buffer zone, to prevent too much encroachment from building, but which allows a degree of community development and involves locals in keeping the area attractive and thus revenue-raising. We arrived, shattered from our drive, at the Eco Wildlife Lodge and 180-degree smiles. After an unpromising lunch, our joyless dampening of the children's expectations paid off. "You will be riding an elephant this afternoon," we were told. Wow, we hadn't dared hope. And off we lolloped, all four of us in one small wooden howdah, into the jungle.

Actually, you are unlikely to be



riding an elephant in the national park itself, as all its six wildlife lodges were recently closed to give better protection for the wildlife. But there are plenty of lodges just across the river, on the doorstep of the buffer area of jungle, where our elephant was benignly lolloping.

On the top of a Chitwan elephant, it is hard to stop your mouth falling open in wonder. At the macaque monkeys and the deer, which collaborate to warn of approaching danger – by scarping. At the denseness and of the undergrowth, the size of the spiders' webs, the variety of birds. (By the time we left I could identify bee-eaters, jungle babblers, cuckoo shrikes, black drongos, tree pies, red-throated flycatchers and honey buzzards.) At the docility and obliging nature of the elephants themselves. They are supposed to have good memories, but, with their power, bulk and intelligence, you can't help thinking they have forgotten all they've ever learnt about being exploited. Then you remember it's the humans who have the guns and the money and the disgusting market in ivory.

But the greatest mouth-opener, as our guide asks for quiet and scans the reeds expertly, is to come across... a rhinoceros. The park is home to one of the last populations of the single-horned Asiatic rhinoceros, and numbers have grown from around 300 in the 1980s to around 503 now, a tribute to the Nepalese army that patrols it. We saw three, lurking blamelessly in a swamp. Ignorantly, I thought

**'What a humbling example of how different life can be'**

**'The greatest mouth-opener is to come across a rhinoceros'**

they might be hostile. But, although evidently not tourist-savvy, why would they be? As with the elephants, they seem too beautiful, too vulnerable for the modern world. A hush falls over us. This is truly special.

Outside the park's confines are a handful of lodges, which arrange 4x4 sorties inside. Our lodge was right on the doorstep of the buffer zone, perfectly placed for nipping into the bush to gawp at the honey buzzards, or just wonder at the profusion of mattress-like undergrowth. Each morning – if not riding an elephant, or venturing into the park to look at crocodiles or taking a river trip – the children would wander out with us and one of three guides (armed only with a stick, which they swore would see off even a rhino).

In my experience, children can find nature rambles more virtuous than enjoyable – but there was no danger of that. Around every corner was a fresh delight, with the guide having to remind the children to keep walking. While the siting of our accommodation could not be faulted (a dozen or so chalets in a riotously fecund garden), nor the dedication and solicitousness of our guides, the sleeping quarters were little more than functional, with guests spread out between 22 "twin-bed cottage style rooms", each with their own solar-heated showers.

After a nightly battle with the mosquito netting and window gauze, we all managed to look refreshed for the communal breakfast in the morning. It may be churlish to mention it, but such an idyllic spot would benefit immeasurably from slightly better food. I feel someone could usefully spend a short time titivating the menu to produce huge marginal gains. Why use tinned vegetables (to complement the grilled meat or just-made curries) when the local shops are heaving with mouthwatering fresh ones?

But all in all, the whole family was captivated by Nepal. I won't pretend that when we got back to Kathmandu, we didn't wallow in the luxury of soft towels and plentiful, warm running water, but it was a wrench to wash away the adventures we had had. Had the last stop on our world tour been worth it? Definitely.

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