

A JOURNEY OF CONTRASTS: CHITWAN'S WILDERNESS AND THE SCARS OF THE EARTH

MY FIRST EXPERIENCE OUTSIDE
THE VALLEY

DATE: SEPTEMBER, 2014

PROLOGUE: THE PROMISE OF ADVENTURE

The year was 2014, a time of uncomplicated joys and the simple anticipation of a family holiday. My parents—my ever-enthusiastic father and my meticulously planning mother—orchestrated a three-day expedition to the fabled lowlands of Chitwan. For a family hailing from the bustling, temperate capital of Kathmandu, the journey promised a thrilling shift in climate, culture, and pace. The trusty family Scorpio was packed with bags, snacks, and an infectious sense of excitement. We were a trio poised to trade the familiar sight of hills for the mysterious expanse of the Terai.

DAY 1: THE DESCENT AND FIRST ENCOUNTERS

The Journey Down: The drive itself was a narrative of changing landscapes. We watched with fascination as the winding, paved roads of the Prithvi Highway snaked down alongside the turbulent Trishuli River. The crisp, thin air of the valley gradually gave way to a warm, heavy humidity that seeped into the car. Lush, terraced hillsides slowly flattened into vast, open fields of green and gold, dotted with majestic

sal trees whose canopy formed a towering green tunnel over parts of the road. The very atmosphere felt different—slower, richer, and buzzing with a life unseen in the city.

Arrival in Sauraha: We reached the tourist hub of Sauraha by midday. The vibe was instantly palpable—a relaxed, frontier-town energy mixed with the thrill of the wild. After checking into our quaint resort, a charming place with cottages nestled amidst flowering gardens, we eagerly freshened up. The call of the wild was irresistible, and we had booked our first activity: the iconic elephant safari.

The Elephant Back Safari: The elephant boarding station was a cacophony of sounds—the gentle grunts of the magnificent animals, the chatter of tourists, and the instructions of the mahouts. We climbed up the wooden platform and onto the waiting elephant's back, settling into the sturdy, howdah seat. The world immediately shifted perspective. Elevated high above the ground, we embarked into the dense sea of elephant grass, the giant creature beneath us moving with a surprisingly gentle, rocking gait. The mahout expertly guided his charge, pointing out fresh pugmarks and disturbed foliage. The anticipation was electric. We saw spotted deer flit through the trees, a sounder of wild boar

root in the mud, and a plethora of exotic birds. But the true king was the one-horned rhinoceros. Spotting a massive male grazing in a clearing was a heart-stopping moment of pure wonder.

A Sobering Sight: It was on this ride, as we skirted the buffer zone between the park and a Tharu settlement, that the past intruded upon the present. Amidst the vibrant life, I noticed a traditional home made of mud, dung, and straw that lay in partial ruin. One wall had completely collapsed into a heap of earth, and the roof sagged precariously. "The monsoon weather is hard on these old buildings," my mother observed. But our mahout, with a quiet, knowing look, added a deeper layer. "Some damage, babu," he said, "is from the old earthquake. The big one from many years ago. It shook the earth here too, and some things never stood straight again." His words hung in the air, a silent, sobering testament to nature's enduring power, even amidst the thrill of our safari.

DAY 2: RIVER MYSTERIES AND CULTURAL RHYTHMS

Morning on the Rapti: The second day dawned bright and humid. After a hearty breakfast, we set out for what would become the most visceral experience of the trip: a dugout canoe ride on the Rapti River. The canoe was a long, hollowed-out log, seemingly precarious but expertly handled by a boatman with a long pole. The silence on the water was profound, broken only by the dip of the pole and the chorus of jungle insects and birds. We glided past banks of thick clay and tangled roots, our eyes sharp for any sign of movement.

The Crocodile's Gaze: I was seated near the edge, mesmerized by the gentle flow of the water, when the boatman suddenly froze and raised a hand. There, camouflaged perfectly against the brown mud of the riverbank, was a massive mugger crocodile. It was mere feet from our boat, so still it seemed sculpted from stone. Its ancient, reptilian eyes were half-open, watching our silent passage with primal indifference. I could see every ridge on its formidable armored back, the terrifying power of its jaw. A jolt of pure adrenaline shot through me—a potent mix of fear and awe. It was a raw, unfiltered encounter with the

wild, a moment where the boundary between observer and participant felt thrillingly thin.

Tharu Culture and Cuisine: The evening was dedicated to immersion in local culture. We attended a spectacular Tharu cultural show where dancers, dressed in vibrant traditional attire, performed the iconic stick dance (Sakhiya Nritya) with energetic precision, their movements telling stories of harvest and history. Later, we indulged in a authentic Tharu dinner—a flavorful spread of ghonghi (river snails) curry, smoked fish, and hearty lentil pancakes (bhatmaas ko bara), a culinary adventure that delighted our taste buds and completed the cultural experience.

DAY 3: A PEACEFUL FAREWELL AND LASTING IMPRESSIONS

A Final Walk: Our last morning was reserved for a guided nature walk through the community forest. With a knowledgeable guide, we learned about the different flora and fauna, the medicinal properties of various plants, and identified the tracks and droppings of animals that had passed through the

night before. It was a peaceful, educational end to our adventurous itinerary.

The Journey Home: As our bike began the ascent back to Kathmandu, the trio was quiet, each of us processing the tapestry of experiences. The excitement of the elephant ride, the heart-pounding proximity to the crocodile, the vibrant energy of the cultural dance, the unique tastes, and the silent, crumbling reminders of the earth's power—all were woven together into a single, unforgettable memory.

Epilogue: A Memory Preserved

That three-day trip in 2014 was more than a simple holiday; it was a profound immersion into the dual nature of Nepal itself—its breathtaking beauty and its formidable power. It was a lesson in observing not just the obvious thrills, but also the subtle stories etched into the landscape. Little did we know that these memories would become a precious capsule of a time before the world changed, a cherished family story of our trio's adventure in the wild, wild lowlands. The warmth of the sun, the cool river spray, and the awe-inspiring gaze of the crocodile remain vivid, a timeless treasure from a journey with my parents.

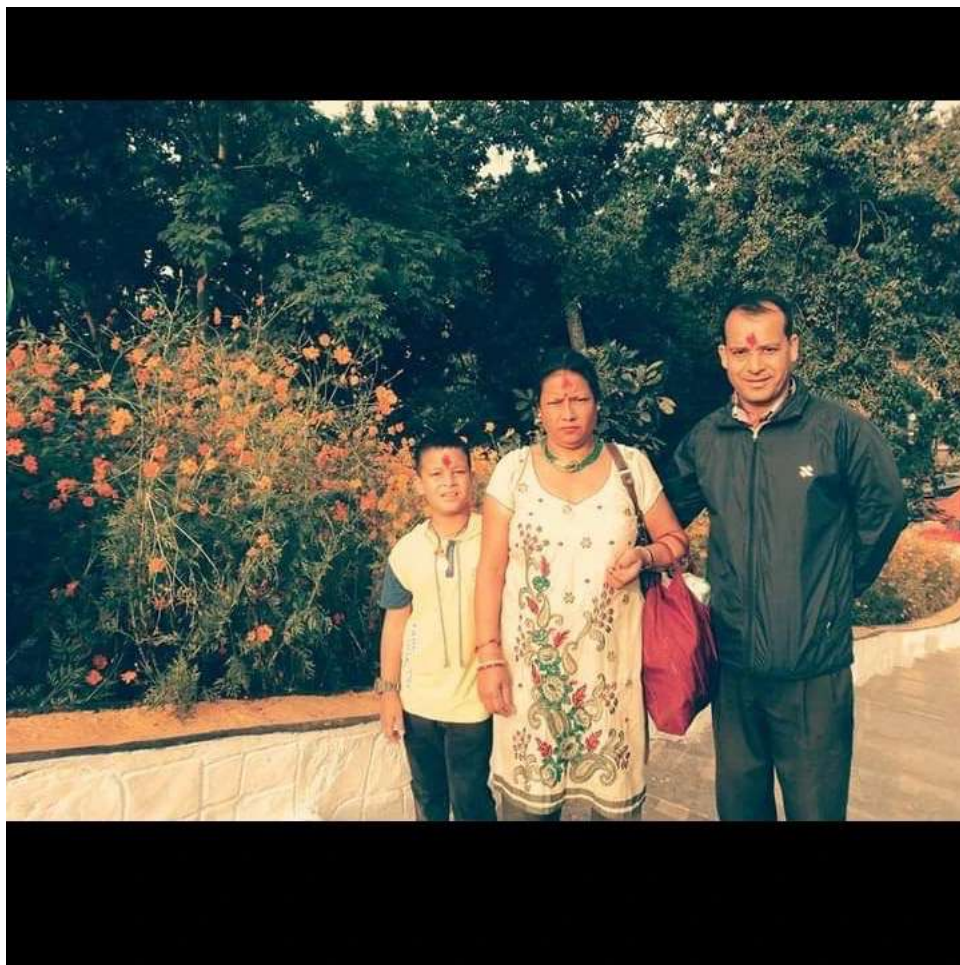


Fig: With my parents in Maulakali Temple, Chitwan



Figure: At Maulakali Temple



Figure: Click By Me



Figure: Two elephant baby



Figure: Me with my father