

WISH I WAS THERE

Edmund Hillary's
'Happy House' in Nepal



Sophy Roberts on a beloved Himalayan retreat that she longs, one day, to revisit

Sophy Roberts | APRIL 9, 2020

Our plane pierced the narrow gap between a Himalayan hillside striped with terracing and a ball of cloud, its edges stained black with rain. We were banking hard in order to pull up at a narrow strip — more ledge than runway — carved into the edge of the mountain, to arrive in one of the most precious places I know: the Happy House in Phaplu village, deep in the Solukhumbu region of northeastern Nepal.

In the 15th century, the Sherpa people migrated into these valleys, as tightly squeezed as the bellows on an accordion, from Kham in Tibet. They were escaping the marauding Mongols, as well as searching for one of the 108 hidden holy valleys scattered through the Himalayas described by Guru Rinpoche in the eighth century.

Known as beyuls, the whereabouts of these paradises (if they even exist on this plane of reality) are concealed by snowstorms and mists. Finding a beyul is also an interior quest — an important part of a spiritual awakening in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

I first came to Nepal when I was 18. I still have the letters I wrote weekly to my father during the six months I was away, each inked on thin airmail paper, which I exchanged for his letters from home in Scotland that I found waiting for me at a poste restante. It was the first independent travel I'd ever done — a long way from my childhood holidays on the west coast of Ireland.

Nepal felt like another universe: the cut and thrust of crowds, of heat and colour, holy cows, stark poverty, the waft of ganja, a dog-eared Lonely Planet guide, the spill and glow of butter lamps, the drone of gyaling — reed instruments, not unlike oboes, used in Buddhist ceremonies — and rats running over my toes at night in some dollar-a-night dive on Freak Street in Kathmandu.

Nepal endures its share of troubles: earthquakes, bloody royal murders, systemic political corruption, and now, like the rest of the world, Covid-19. But memory is also a persuasive editor. When I look at my old photographs of Chitwan in the country's south, I think of something else. The images smell of jungle, long grasses and damp dawns.



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When I look at the pictures of my children near Phaplu, in a place we nicknamed The Holy Forest, we're lying on a cushion of golden moss. The light is sieved by leaves. The wind catches the puttering lung-ta, or prayer flags, which carry invisible blessings elsewhere. Another hour of walking and we will be able to see the peak of Everest and the entire rim of the eastern Himalayas, as far east as the Kanchenjunga massif.

It was my French uncle who tipped me off about Phaplu. He'd gone to visit an old friend, a German film-maker, Franz-Christoph Giercke, who since 1982 had been living between Nepal and Germany. Giercke had spent two years making a documentary about a Buddhist lama, Trulshik Rinpoche, and a Sherpa festival called Mani Rimdu — a story told in dance about how Buddhism was established in Tibet. It takes place each autumn at Chiwong monastery, a couple of miles north of Phaplu.

My uncle described walking through rhododendrons and forests strung with lichens like silver beards, of reading by candlelight beside an open hearth he'd helped to repair. He had stayed at the so-called Happy House, which Giercke was renting in Phaplu — in a copse of trees, with thick stone walls and heavy temple doors.

When I met Giercke soon after, he became one of my closest friends. "How extraordinary it is to actually meet someone with the courage not only to believe in a land of dreams but to leave everything behind for it," writes Thomas K Shor in *A Step Away from Paradise*, the true story of a Tibetan lama's Himalayan expedition to find a beyul.

The house became the lodestar of my family's visits to Nepal. It was built in 1971 under the instruction of the Italian mountaineer Count Guido Monzino, who summited Everest in 1973 on an expedition notable for the fine wines and hundreds of porters he took along. "I felt your party was so strong and well organized that the final result was almost inevitable," wrote Sir Edmund Hillary to Monzino in a letter of May 19 1973: "Perhaps I am old-fashioned in wishing to see a return to the smaller, less professional type of operation."

The house, then called Hostellerie des Sherpas, was bankrolled by Monzino, but owned and built by a Sherpa family called the Lamas. In the early days, it functioned as a lodge for Everest mountaineers. It was also where Hillary used to stay; he was the one who gave it the moniker of "the Happy House", which is the name it retains today.

Then tragedy struck. In 1975, Hillary's wife and daughter were killed in a plane crash leaving Kathmandu for Phaplu. Instead of their plane, a helicopter flew into the village, to break the news to Hillary.

Writing to friends five days after the accident, Hillary said he felt compelled to complete the hospital that his charitable trust was building next door to the Happy House: "Whatever else happens I feel the task must be finished... I will then walk up to Khumbu and cry a little with our friends. What will happen then I don't quite know. Life must go on, I suppose."

Up until 2001, Hostellerie des Sherpas, latterly renamed the Hotel del Sherpa, continued to function as a hotel for the six-month annual tourist season (March to May and October to December) and otherwise as a private house for the Lama family.

Then a violent communist insurgency gripped Nepal, and in November of that year the Maoists swung through this valley. The patriarch of the Lama family, Rinzi Pasang Lama (known by his friends as RP), hid in the grounds of the Happy House as 35 government officials were killed in a single night of bloodshed. Twelve days later, RP fled as a political refugee with his family to New York, with \$10,000 and a suitcase. During the family's absence, however, the house needed a guardian. Giercke wagered that his foreignness would protect him; he rented the house and vowed to look after it until peace returned.



The annual Mani Rimdu festival at Chiwong monastery.



Young monks at the Chiwong monastery, a couple of miles north of Phaplu.



Looking towards Everest at dawn from a camping spot above Phaplu.

In 2017, following Nepal's first general election since the monarchy was abolished and civil war ended, the house was handed back. With his youngest son, Ang Tshering Lama, RP did up the 1970s plumbing and electricity and reopened the Happy House in October 2018 to paying clients, as part of Ang's new expedition company, Beyul Experiences.

And now Covid-19.

"Nothing is permanent," says Ang on the phone to me from lockdown in Kathmandu. "You can go through hell, but that will also come to an end." He is referencing the Buddhist Wheel of Life, which is an image decorating the Happy House's walls. Every inch of the downstairs is painted like a monastery by a Sherpa master of Buddhist thangkas.

From far away, I imagine the candles illuminating the roomful of demons and deities battling it out in the eternal fight between good and evil, sickness and health. I think of Ang's father sitting at the long oak table and talking with Dr Mingmar Gyelzen, who still lives next door and who helped set up the hospital with Hillary. We are eating soup made by the cheerful cook, a vegetable broth scooped up in a "Sherpa spoon" of toasted buckwheat bread. I can hear the Mani Rimdu festival: the haunting music of the long copper trumpets; the din of conch shells, announcing the start of the ritual; the swirling dancers, their bodies rustling in colourful brocades.



Rhododendrons, the national flower of Nepal.

In *Rhythms of a Himalayan Village*, the American writer Hugh R. Downs describes the decorative fire that tips the hats of the dancers' costumes, how the fire represents light rather than combustion: "Buddhism conquered Tibet by uplifting, not by destroying."

Is it that spirit of optimism I'm drawn to as I write this piece in isolation in England? When we went on a long, multi-day trek from the house to Pikey Peak, at an altitude of just over 4,000m, the weather took an unseasonal turn. We were so bone-cold we had to dance to keep the children warm — 30 people waving their sleeping bags in the air to the beat of stomping feet, in an impromptu dance my sons still mistakenly think is an official Sherpa tradition.

Difficulty demands we try to stay upbeat, to remember nothing is permanent, life goes on — whether we do so by dancing, praying, reading or travelling in the mind to a place far away.

Just as I did on that cold mountain, I'm looking forward to returning to the Happy House — a locus of fantasy and comfort, where you fall into handspun blankets, a home that seems to wrap its arms around all who come to stay.



Sir Edmund Hillary with Ang Tshering Lama (far right) and other members of the family, in the grounds of the Happy House in the mid-1990s



Ang Tshering Lama, who runs the Happy House with his father.