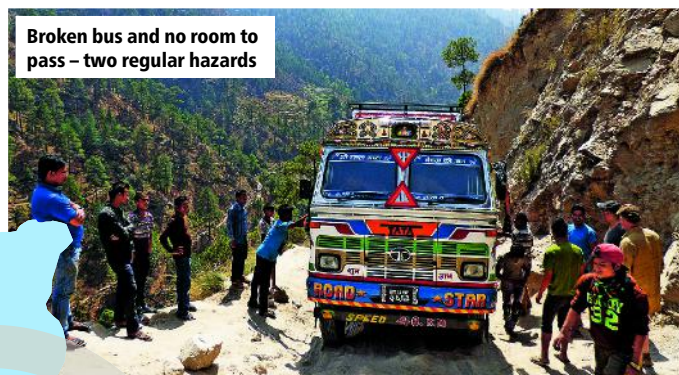
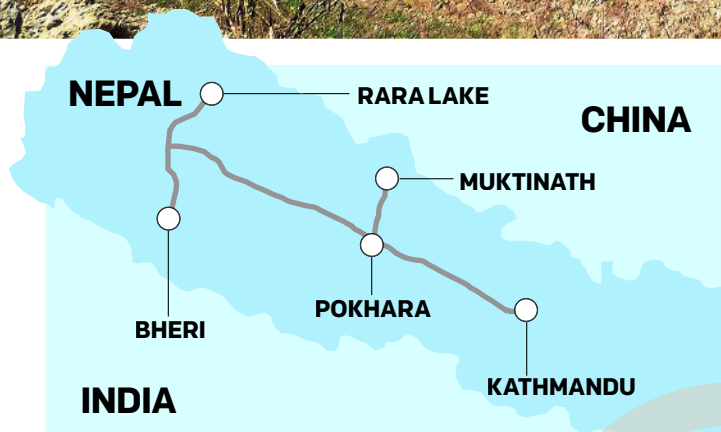




Lush valleys give way to lunar landscapes and rough trails



Broken bus and no room to pass – two regular hazards

on a hill, and stayed the night at a pilgrim's hostel, ending the day with fantastic apple brandy made in the village of Marpha.

Our trail then took us back to Pokhara where we swapped Land Rovers. Ruby was needed back in Kathmandu, so I hopped into Bessie, a very neat Range Rover Classic that had until recently been the property of the Nepali Royal Family. In company with the green 90 TDCi double cab belonging to Gurkha Colonel Ian Logan, the British Defence Attaché, and also the immaculately restored 1993 Discovery of businessman Mohindra Shrestha, we headed out west from Pokhara to one of the most remote bodies of water in Nepal, Rara Lake.

This was to be a long haul. From Pokhara we picked up the Karnali Valley heading north from Nepalganj on the border with India, and then started to climb up to Rara. And up. And up. It seemed endless. The three Land Rovers would ascend a valley along dirt tracks, reach the crest and then meet another valley, stacked on top of the one we'd just struggled up. I say 'struggled' because the road was pretty rough – a narrow, single-vehicle-wide

'With a 1000ft (and more) drop to our side, this was a drive that concentrated the mind'

mud and rock track, sometimes pounded flat, sometimes so deeply rutted that most vehicles wouldn't get through. It wound on for hours.

With a 1000ft drop (and more) off to our right, this was a drive that concentrated the mind. Occasionally we'd meet a vehicle coming the other way. Sometimes it was a tractor, sometimes a huge four-wheel-drive bus with massive ground clearance – the locals' only way of travelling between the hill villages that punctuated our marathon climb. The nightmare was, of course, meeting such a bus coming the other way – with no room to pass each other, our Land Rovers and the bus would have to shuffle back and forth along

the vertigo-inducing track until one or the other could pass safely.

In time we drew into the village of Nagmaghat. Too small to be found on any of our maps, nonetheless it optimistically boasted a 'hotel', a rickety structure perched over a river on stilts (toilet – hole in the floor, open to the river). Parking the three Land Rovers outside amid a curious crowd, we all trundled in to a meal of dhal bhat (lentil curry and rice) and Gurkha beer.

It was then that we noticed the other dinner guests – rats. Big ones. There was a ledge round the ceiling of the communal room of the hotel, and on it were at least half a dozen very smug-looking rats, eyeing our dhal bhat with interest. Occasionally one would scamper along the ledge to a better vantage point, then settle down to eyeball us again. We tried to ignore them and later conked out in respective rooms, some with rat populations, although this time the rats were dead. We weren't sure if this was a plus or not.

Morning brought a return to the trail, and another long day of bouncing along. Before