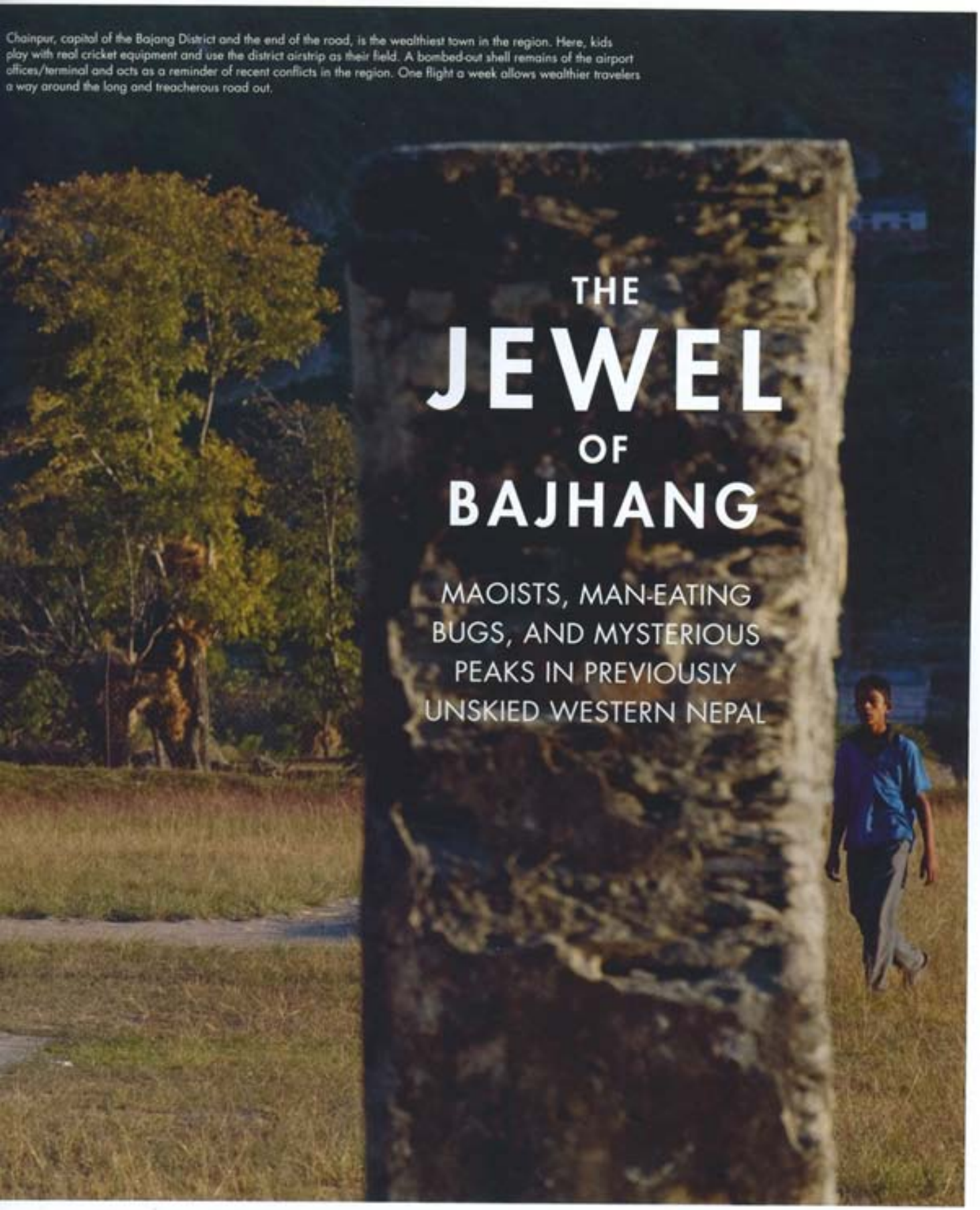


Chainpur, capital of the Bajang District and the end of the road, is the wealthiest town in the region. Here, kids play with real cricket equipment and use the district airstrip as their field. A bombed-out shell remains of the airport offices/terminal and acts as a reminder of recent conflicts in the region. One flight a week allows wealthier travelers a way around the long and treacherous road out.

THE JEWEL OF BAJHANG

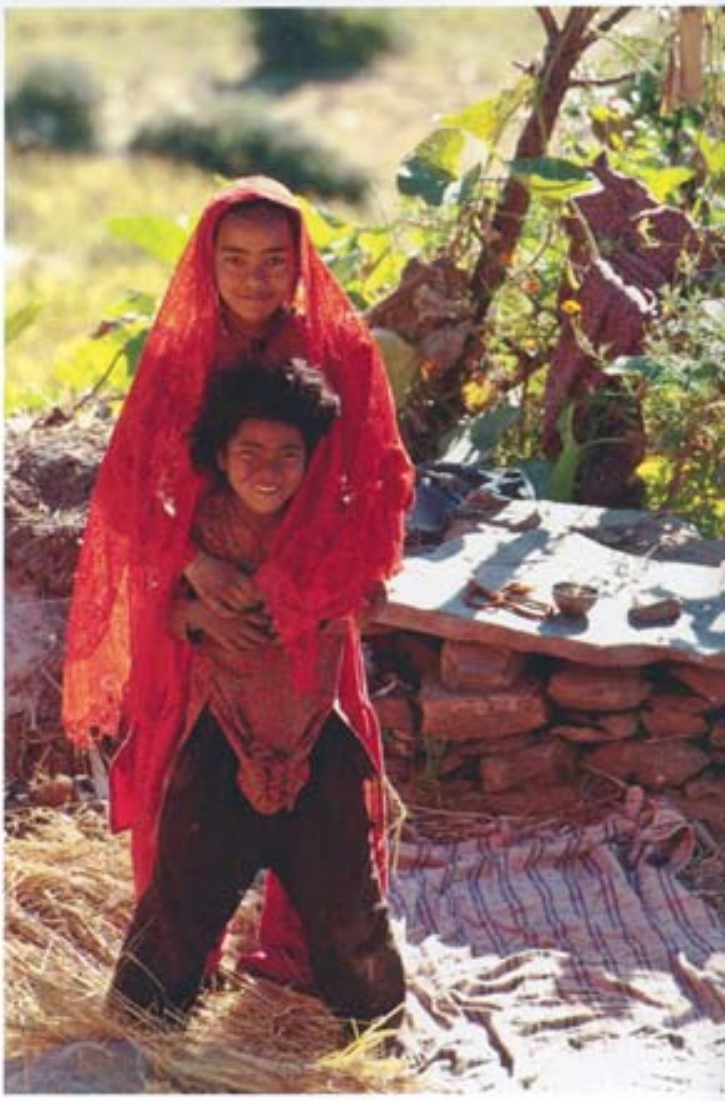
MAOISTS, MAN-EATING BUGS, AND MYSTERIOUS PEAKS IN PREVIOUSLY UNSKIED WESTERN NEPAL

Sunrise in the Saipal region viewed from midway up our climb of an unnamed peak—known simply as "Peak 5,500m"—that topped out around 18,000 feet, and the location of our one and only true ski decent. The steep canyons of our approach can be seen in the left of the photo.

Words: Devon O'Neal
Images: James Laidlaw

Never mind the 28 hours of layovers, or the five days we spent waiting for our skis to arrive in Kathmandu. The trip began, for real, in Dhangadhi, an impoverished delta of rice paddies and vodka billboards on the Nepal-India border, where cobras prowl the bushes and bananas grow wild in peoples' backyards.

Two girls take a break from their morning chores to pose for a picture along the lower reaches of the Seti River, a day's walk north of Chainpur.



A porter hauls our most precious cargo, our skis, over a 13,000-foot pass on the journey home. The porters insisted we take the shortcut over the pass even though none of them had ever traveled the route before.

When we got off the plane, we were at the same latitude as Tampa, Fla. The sign on the terminal read: "Elevation 690 feet"—an odd place to start a Himalayan ski expedition. The air was 93 degrees and so thick sweat dripped off our noses as we stood still. Kris Erickson, 35, a Montana native and one of the three ski mountaineers I'd joined for the trip, mumbled incredulously, "I've never felt heat like this in my life."

It was obvious Dhangadhi does not see many outsiders. But we weren't there to stay; our agent in Kathmandu, Jiban, had a friend who distributes cigarettes to all of western Nepal and, we were told, could help us get where we wanted to go.

Our destination was one of the most breathtaking and culturally pure regions in the Himalayas, but also one of the poorest and most difficult to reach. In 2008, more than 500,000 tourists visited Nepal. There's a good chance zero of them traveled to the Bajhang district.

The jewel of Bajhang is the Saipal Himal, a tantalizing mountain range up to 7,000 meters tall that feeds an aqua-green river, the Seti, and is flanked by a web of lush villages and waterfalls. Idaho-based skier Jamie Laidlaw, 29, had been using Google Earth photos and topographical maps to scout the Saipal region's ski-mountaineering possibilities for a year. None of the mountains had been skied and only a few had been climbed, decades ago.

Laidlaw and Erickson became enamored with one valley in particular—outrageously remote but full of 18,000- to 20,000-foot peaks. They signed on Kip Garre, 36, a Squaw Valley house painter whose humility belies his reputation among ski mountaineering's elite, and began to explore the logistics.

Until the decade-long civil war ended in 2006, venturing into Nepal's far west was like walking through a maximum-security prison yard with no guards on duty. It was the lair of the Maoists—a communist sect engaged in armed revolution—who fought a "People's War" from 1996 until 2005.[1] But, in 2006, the Maoists gave up their guns and won representation in Parliament. The far west was open again.

Still, its mountains remained empty and nameless—like a peeling point break on an island with no surfers. When we arrived to pick up our permit in Kathmandu, the men at the Nepalese Tourism Ministry asked us to bring back details of where we went and how we got there, because they had no information about the area.

Their request was on my mind when we left sweltering Dhangadhi and drove 12 slow, lurching hours in a 10-ton truck—eight of us sardined in the cab—before stopping for the night in Deura, a tiny, rundown village on the Seti. We slept two to a room in concrete cells with neck-high ceilings. Not long after I fell asleep, I awoke to the feeling of being eaten. I flicked on my headlamp to see brown bugs, hundreds of them, burrowed in my sleeping bag, scurrying along the wall, crawling on my ankles. What looked like a mutation of termites, fleas, and ticks chewed us like wood that night. Laidlaw

1 The so-called "People's War" began in response to the Nepalese government's failure to revoke royal privilege; to end the Mahakali Treaty with India (which regulated water and electricity and established what the Maoists believed to be an unfair border between the two countries); and to institute constitutional reforms, among other things. The Unified Communist Party of Nepal, descended from the Maoists, now holds the largest voting bloc in the Nepali Constituent Assembly—albeit still under charges of force and fraud from the Nepali Congress party and the Communist Party of Nepal.

fled to the dirt tundra in front of the building, only to wake up with a stray dog asleep on his head.

The next morning I wondered aloud whether my travel partners were as unnerved as I was, given the hell we endured a few hours prior. Laidlaw, his body covered in red welts that would remain for 10 days, let a strange smile crease his face. "If you really want the adventure," he told me, "if you really want to drop off the face of the earth, you'd better be ready to deal with shit like this."

FROM BILL BRIGGS in the Tetons to Hans Kammerlander in the Himalayas, ski mountaineering has always been a sport for explorers, people at whom the unknown tugs like a magnet. Recently, though, the game has swung in a different direction. Descents of 8,000-meter peaks—the ones that garner the most attention, with well-known routes to the top—have become much more common objectives for the world's elite skiers, even if they're sometimes only repeating others' feats.

"Ski mountaineering has a tendency to go with the sure thing," Laidlaw presciently said one day on the trail. "It's a lot of work to lug all that extra equipment for thousands of miles when you're not even sure if you're going to get to put 'em on your feet."

My travel partners aren't immune to the 8,000-meter draw. Erickson was the first American man to ski an 8,000-meter peak (Cho Oyu in 2002). Laidlaw nearly completed the first descent of the fabled Lhotse Couloir in 2007, skiing the 50-degree tube from just below the summit at 27,000 feet. Garre took part in an expedition to ski Gasherbrum II in 2008, which ultimately proved unsuccessful.

Yet the three of them also appreciate the smaller peaks. Part of their reason for designing this trip to far western Nepal was to ski virgin mountains, but also to explore a region that has seen only a handful of Westerners in its history. As Erickson said, "You don't know what you're going to find."

That was true from the start. The trek from Chainpur—the last semi-civilized village we would see for a month—to the mountains took us through a jungle slightly less thick than the Amazon. We encountered leeches and skinks (snakes with legs) and alarmingly hairy spiders, and, at times had to shout to be heard over the screeching cicadas. The birds, bright orange and yellow, followed as we hiked through massive fields of nettle, which burned our skin like fiberglass shards. One morning we chased 50 white-bearded monkeys through a forest.

Everything was going well until it began to rain on our second day, softly at first, then in sheets. It didn't stop until four days later, when we were in Kanda, a village known for its potent hashish. By that time, our porters had all but threatened mutiny and morale was nonexistent.

As we stood in the sun waiting for our gear to dry that afternoon, an 18-year-old villager approached and asked if we had any medical supplies to treat a 2-year-old boy with "a cut" on his head. He pulled back the boy's wool hat and revealed a gash that almost made me gag. It looked like someone had dug out half the kid's forehead and left the hunk of flesh hanging.

A woman with a dolko—a basket carried with a tumpline across the forehead—harvests millet, a major food source throughout the Himalayas.

Mother, daughter, and granddaughter taking a break in the hub of the village, the water spigot, in one of the most well-developed small towns we encountered during our journey.

Porters on the series of high-altitude ridges leading us back to Chainpur. We were destined to spend the night on the ridge with no water and our porters spread over miles. They happily built small fires and hunkered down for the night with no complaints. It goes without saying they are far tougher than we are.

Kip Garre prepares to drop into the steep, 50-degree, breakable entrance of "Peak 5,500m's" couloir. 5,000 feet of relief lies beneath him as Kris Erickson readies his camera.

"What happened?" I asked.

"He fell off a roof," came the reply.

Garre and Laidlaw spent the next hour cleaning the boy's wound as he lay, clothed in just a shirt, on a cold piece of slate surrounded by locals. When they finished, they made it very clear: "If this gets infected, the boy will die. You have to get him to medical care as soon as possible—which means start walking tomorrow." The urgency underscored our remoteness. We were deep. And going deeper.

We reached base camp the next day, after the jungle porters refused to walk any further. At just 8,400 feet elevation, the camp was 3,000 feet lower and two days of hiking from where we'd hoped to end up. So it went.

Our foursome's ensuing journey into alpine terrain necessitated massive packs—seven days of food as well as all our gear, totaling 50-60 pounds per man—and was complicated by perilous terrain. Instead of the wide, flat glacial valleys that lead to many Himalayan monsters, the Saipal mountains are accessed by densely vegetated, V-shaped river gorges as steep as 80 degrees with hundreds of feet of exposure. The trails are chopped into the rock hillside and are often so narrow you have to turn and face the mountain and then shimmy across an icy ledge no wider than your shoe is long. "Full contact," as Garre liked to call it.

Moments like that were only a hair more serious than the bridge we crossed to get to them: an unattached log-and-driftwood plank that bounced and creaked over the fuming Seti, which plunged three stories onto boulders beneath us. The bridge had been repaired by a group of Nepalis who had tried to sell us organic sex pills four days earlier.

Every day, we'd look at our map and try to predict the terrain from its 600-foot contour lines. But there was no way to know until we saw it.

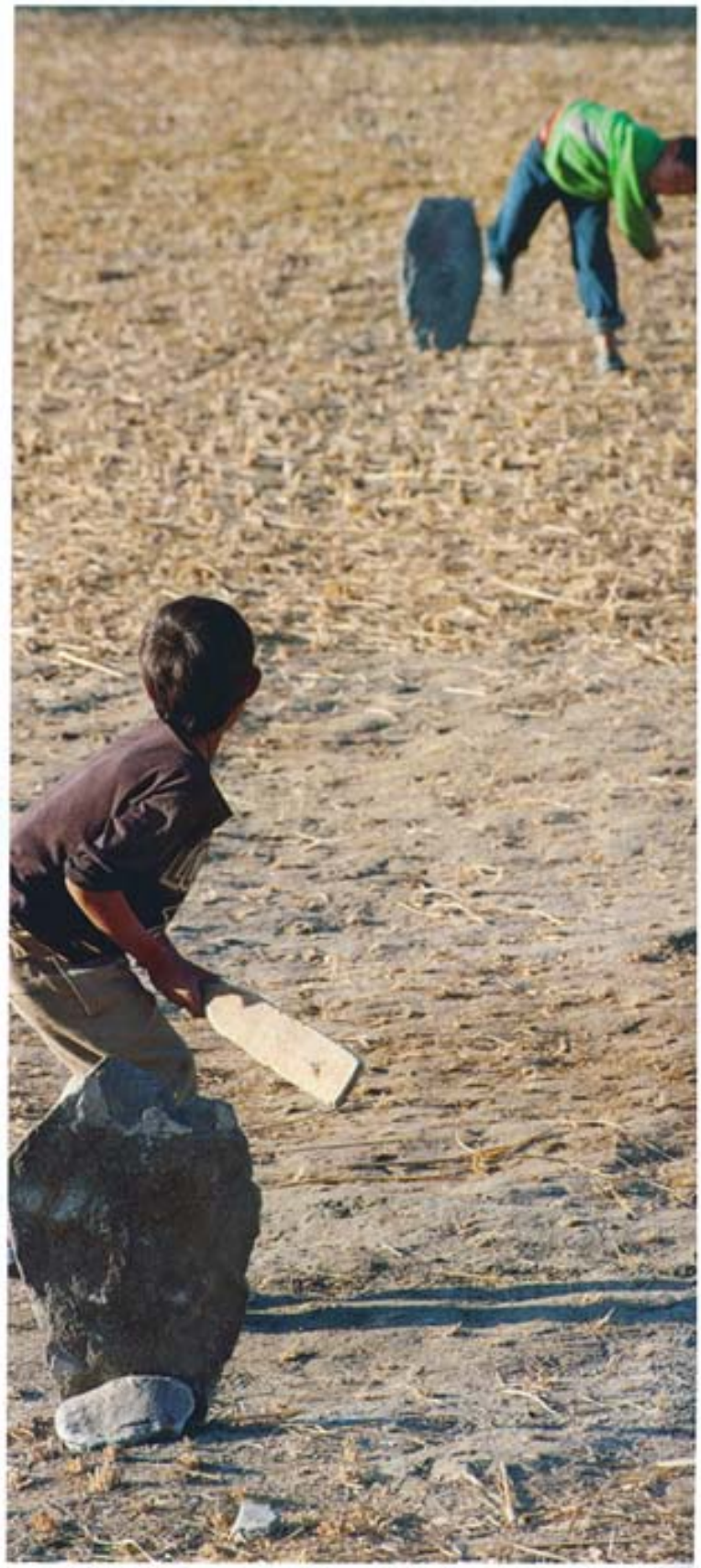
The peaks, as it turned out, were much more convoluted and imposing than the Google Earth images had let on. Despite being at least 6,000 feet lower than 8,000-meter mountains, they featured just as much vertical relief. And we had to ascend at least three or four subridges, many of them technical, just to get onto a mountain.

It was from one of those subridges that we made our first turns of the trip, on October 16. We lucked into a north-facing stash of recrystallized powder 3,300 feet above our camp and, looking back now, skied 'em like we'd earned 'em.

Afterward, Garre and Laidlaw walked down to scout the river. The only way to the final skiing objective, a giant couloir on a rocky, 18,000-foot peak rimmed by snow leopard tracks, was to ford the Seti. We took off our socks and crossed in our shoes, reaching our deepest point on Day 27.

I got up early the next morning to shoot a photo of the trio as they cramponed up the massive cavern of runneled, 45- to 50-degree ice that would stand as the trip's one serious ski-mountaineering achievement. They began at 3 a.m. and climbed 5,000 feet by sunrise. Hundreds of individually calculated turns later, and after Erickson barely stopped a slide for his life, the trio arrived back at camp.

Kids playing a game of makeshift cricket in a dry, previously harvested rice paddy outside of Chainpur. A propped-up stone acts as the wickets and a hand-carved bat are all they need.



That night's mood was bittersweet. They were happy to have accomplished an objective, but couldn't help but wonder what might've been possible with more time. We waded across the Seti at 9:00 the next morning, this time in our bare feet, and began the arduous hike out.

THE WORDS from Kāran the Superporter echoed through my head like a ping-pong ball: "Feeefteeen days! Maybe 20! They will feex the road! Eeets O.K. You stay here till then."

We'd just hiked back into Chainpur. Kāran's news explained, at long last, why our broken satellite phone never reached us in the mountains. The four-day rainstorm in early October had triggered 11 major landslides that destroyed the road into Bajhang—a road that had taken 30 years to build.

Alas, none of us were in a position to stick around for another three weeks. So we made some calls and hired a fixed-wing plane to pick us up the next day on the grass airstrip that doubled as a cricket pitch. Then we got permission from the region's one-star army general, a formal man who cracked hard-boiled eggs on the wall, to spend the night in what remained of the Bajhang airport, a concrete building that had been annihilated four years prior by Maoist guerillas.

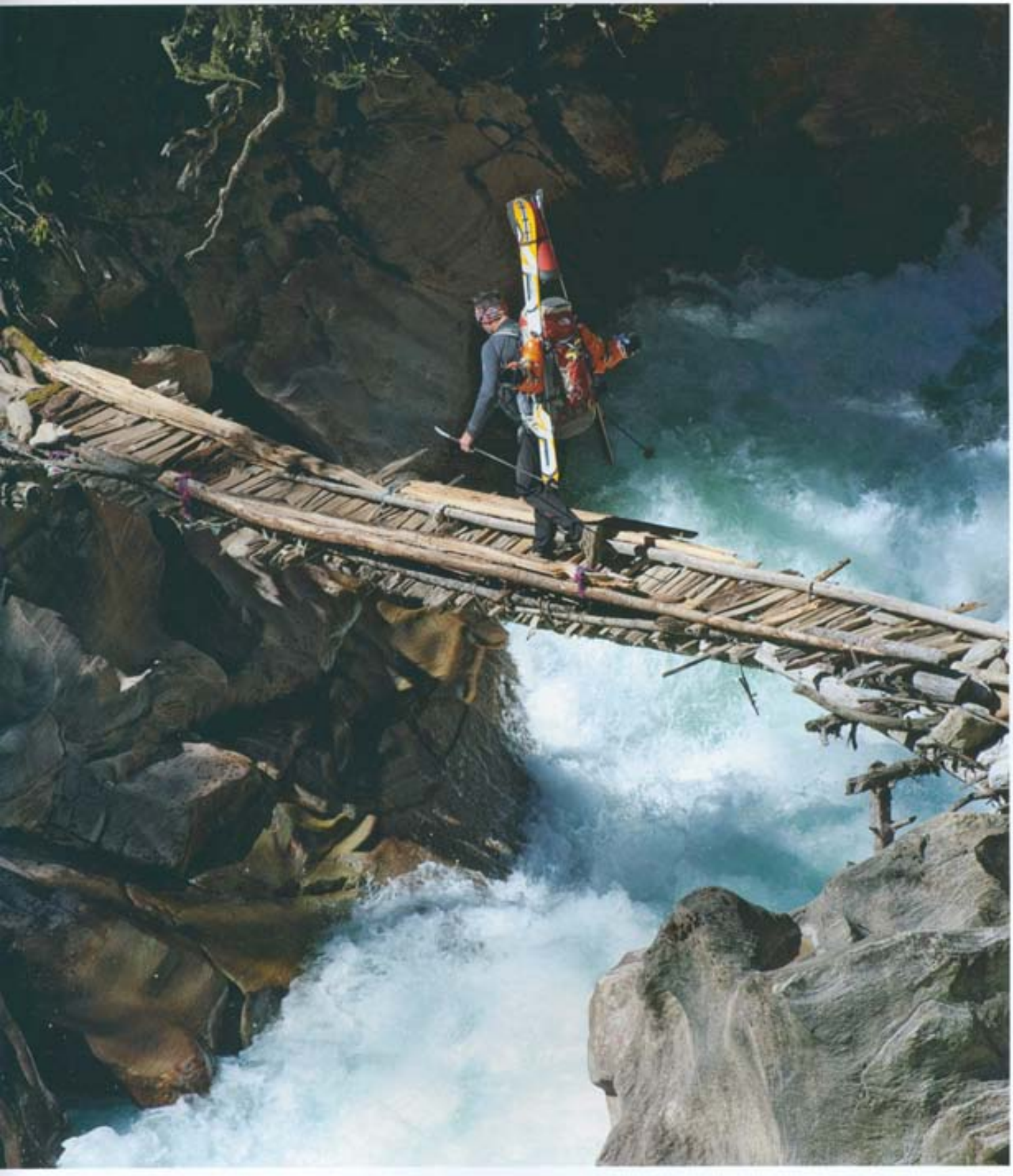
Padam, our cook, walked two kilometers to buy us each a warm beer and himself some rice liquor. As we savored the Tuborgs in the bombed-out airport later that night, it was hard not to think about the times we were leaving behind.

I kept coming back to one theme: how skiing is valued so differently by its devotees. Here were three pros, two of whom ended up paying thousands of dollars to come on this trip—three guys who pledged six weeks of their lives, endured unquantifiable amounts of stress, inhaled each others' heinous musks in tiny tents, and hauled crushing loads over you-fall-you-die terrain…for three ski runs.

The next morning, with half the village watching, our plane lifted off the bumpy earth and into the sky, allowing one final view of the Seti and the peaks in the distance. I felt a pang of sadness as we flew away, the phrase hanging in my head: Three ski runs.

For the first time since our trip began, the concept made perfect sense. ¶

Kris Erickson, carrying a week's worth of food and equipment, carefully navigates one of many the precarious bridges over the Seti River, just one of the numerous obstacles guarding the Saipal Mountains.



CONTRIBUTORS

01 • Prior to diving into journalism in 2002, **DEVON O'NEIL** spent a year as a counterterrorism analyst in Washington, D.C. He grew up in St. John in the U.S. Virgin Islands and learned about winter at Middlebury College in Vermont. Today Devon is based in Breckenridge, Colo., where he also works part time at a ski shop. This story marked his first trip to the Himalayas, and also the first time he'd seen a skink. His writing has appeared in *National Geographic Adventure, Popular Science, Outside, The Los Angeles Times, Skiing,* and on ESPN.com.

02 • **REGGIE CRIST** has done just about everything on skis. The former US Ski Team member and Olympic downhill racer helped pioneer the sport of ski cross by earning five consecutive podium finishes at the X Games. Today, he films and guides all over the world while spending as much time as possible at home in Idaho with his wife and baby daughter. During the off season he kayaks and surfs in Hawaii and Mexico. "Water sports have taught me to be a better skier, especially in difficult situations," he says. "You just have to go with the flow."

03 • A graduate of Western State College of Colorado in 2001, **JACKIE BAKER** was lured to Utah's Little Cottonwood Canyon by its rolling summertime singletrack and deep wintertime powder. A full-time Salt Lake resident, she writes for *Powder* and *Bike,* and has worked for the *ESPN* Winter X Games and Backcountry.com. When she's not smearing around on her Spatulas, she races bikes, coaches riding clinics for Bikeskills, and works as a sales rep for WTB, Sheila Moon, and Marin Bikes.

04 • **ANDREW MCLEAN** has spent most of his adulthood pursing ski-mountaineering objectives around the world. After graduating from art school, he worked at Black Diamond Equipment for 13 years where he designed many innovative products including the Whippet Self Arrest pole. In 2008, he completed a project to ski on all seven continents. Andrew lives near Park City, Utah, but prefers to ski in the central Wasatch backcountry. He is surrounded by beautiful women, notably his wife Polly and two daughters, Mira and Stella.

05 • If you're wondering why **MICHAEL MURPHY** knows so much about the Mahre family, it's because he married one of them. "Murph" (husband to "Jet") started skiing at Paradise on Washington's Mt. Rainier at age 6, and has summitted the mountain more than 75 times by six different routes. He's also successfully climbed Denali twice and has scored numerous ascents throughout the Cascades, Olympics, Wasatch, Alaska, and the Sierra Nevada. Michael is a decorated climbing guide, ski instructor, patroller, wilderness first responder, and more, all of which he assures us is much more rewarding than the stressful construction career he left behind.