

GRUNT *Submitted to our site by Trevor...*

From <http://oldgreenbus.doubledeckerbuses.org/>

I was employed with an Australian company, Top Deck Travel conducting tours in old double decker buses converted to carry 22 passengers and crew. The bus sat, slept and maintained everybody, it was fully self contained with a kitchen and bunks. I was asked to head to Kathmandu with one of the older Top Deck buses, 'Grunt', they all had names. Grunt is a Bristol Lodekka, built in 1954 and used as an English country bus up until about 1972/3. We had seven passengers for the trip out to Kathmandu, they had paid 99 pounds for the trip, this included food kitty, they expected nothing other than the ride of their life. An all-inclusive trip, transport, beds and meals all taken care of by Grunt. They were also aware that sightseeing was to be minimal, this group turned out to be a really good bunch of people who enjoyed the ride. If only they realized that I was teaching John, while he was teaching me and that by the time we got to Kathmandu, they the passengers would have about as much experience on the overland that John and I had.

London to Kathmandu in three weeks, it was daunting, I was to teach John the job and how to drive on the way. When there, we were to join two other buses for a return journey, Moose and Acko were the two drivers. The need for Grunt was brought on by extra bookings for that particular Kathmandu departure. Like any good business, Top Deck never knock back bookings, any problem could be solved, additional bookings just send another bus to Kathmandu, simple. John, 6 male Australians, 1 English female and I left London on the 10 April 1978.

In that short three weeks Grunt would cover in excess of 12,000 kilometres at a top speed of about 75 kilometres per hour with a tail wind, any hill would slow us to a crawl and on this route there were some hills, lots of them. I saw some wonderful things, just the scenery, where people lived and different styles of villages and towns, after passing through Istanbul the country that unfolded was all new for me. Some of the trip was a blur as we just drove solidly for day and night, we alternated from the driving to a bunk upstairs, the first stretch was London to Istanbul, the second from there to Tehran so basically it was one stop other than fuel and provisions until Tehran. During that time I did notice things like mount Ararat, the resting place of Noah and his Ark on the left in northeast Turkey. I was in for a big surprise when traveling through Iran, for some reason I expected little habitation, but found it to be quite modern with numerous fuel stations and very cheap fuel. This was a big change as Turkey had massive fuel shortages that would remain for a number of years to come. I did get to have a look in Tehran, the capital of Iran, then still controlled by the Shah. I really liked Tehran; we frequented a great bar with nice mugs of frothy beer, steaks and pizzas. The women in Tehran were beautiful, the ones I noticed were as they had piecing eyes, and appeared to flirt, or was that my imagination. The nice looking ladies at the Tehran telephone exchange were all flirts, but I was aware that playing with these ladies was like stepping into a minefield. While flirting at the telephone exchange, I rang Mick Carroll in London and told him that I could live here in Tehran; I was so impressed with the place.

We free camped (as you did) outside a fire station not far from the enormous markets, they allowed us to use their facilities, new tyres were purchased for Grunt, as they were much cheaper here than in the UK or Europe as was the fuel. After that short

administrative layover in Tehran we continued onto Afghanistan, at that time controlled by President Douad, but as we were soon to learn, not for long. The transit visa's that had been issued to us indicated that Afghanistan was to be closed to foreigners from 30.4.78 to 12.5.78, we had to enter prior to the 26.4.78 to allow us enough time to get across and out before the 30th.

We arrived at the border between Iran and Afghanistan on the 25.4.78 it was an eye opener, the Irani side was ultra modern, with parking bays where vehicles were stripped and searched. All travelers had to pass a small museum within the complex displaying trophies. This consisted of numerous objects behind glass cases showing how drugs and other contraband had been detected. Gas bottles cut in half with internal containers for hash oil and a little gas bottle, indicating to the uneducated that the bottle actually containing gas, we however found these displays very interesting. We had no troubles with the customs as we were heading east as it was only the people traveling west who got into smuggling drugs and received the attention of the Irani Customs. One fellow in particular we knew as 'The Rat' he was a little bloke who looked like a rodent and would search the bus with a screwdriver, just tapping away, tap, tap, tap, tonk, tap. It was then he would remove panels and conduct a more thorough and invasive search. We never had real concerns with drugs, as it was a very strong policy that our buses were dope free. Other's obviously didn't have the same rules as these guys caught plenty, I dread to think what happened to the offenders who would most certainly soon become victims. I always thought that with their reputation and the museum people would be deterred from smuggling dope, but they still caught plenty.

After leaving the Iranian border post there is a drive into the desert, I was told by John that it was a couple of kilometres to the Afghan border post. The roadway was rough, Grunt wasn't happy; it went on and on, it seemed to take forever. I think no mans land was at least 15 kilometres until we reached the Afghan border post. It was like none I had ever seen before. A very poor example of a tin shed was the passport control, there were dead vehicles lying about the place and people trying to get processed. The Afghans here seemed to be absolute dopes, they appeared to understand and do nothing. One thing they did understand however was Bucksheesh, Bucksheesh is a common saying throughout this part of the world meaning 'gift' or payment, commonly used by beggars.

Soon we were on our way, a three hour drive to Herat our first stop into Afghanistan, it was a magic place, a very primitive city, we stayed in a hotel close to the centre. The bus was manoeuvred in through the archway to the enclosed courtyard of the small hotel, this was as it always was in Afghanistan, I believed that the archways were tall enough for the buses as previous travelers would have used loaded camels, probably just as high as Grunt. These types of premises offered good security for our vehicle and of course us. It was the case where we would pay a fee for a room with bathroom, these were used by us all with most still sleeping on the bus in the courtyard. It was an arrangement that was frequently used by top Deck on overlands as camping grounds were not readily available and when they were, mostly situated on the outskirts of the city. We had some minor repairs to carry out, mainly a couple of the tyres were punctured and needed fixing. I met a young an Afghani boy of about ten years who insisted on helping me and being my personal guide, he took me around to the various places I needed and made my job a lot easier. I looked after him with some bucksheesh for his troubles for which he was happy. It was only a few Afghani's probably one dollars worth Afghani's was at that time the local currency, something we shortened to af's. I

have often wondered what happened to him and others like him whom I had dealings with.



The road south to Kandahah from Herat was a good 10 hour drive, the roadway was a good concrete slab surface, I think Grunt enjoyed this. This road was built by the Russians for the Afghani's as an aid project, it also led straight up into the USSR from Herat, that would help later. I believe that the Russians always have an ulterior motive, this later proved to be one of those occasions. The barren landscape was vast, hills and mountains to the northeast where very little vegetation was apparent. It was also a lonely place, very few travelers or locals were encountered, just the occasional truck and Police post where the toll was paid.

Kandahah is Afghanistan's second largest city, it is also the gateway to the south into Pakistan and another remote city Quetta, a place that I would visit several times in the future. The whole area has an ancient name, Baluchistan. The people are known as Baluchi's and are very proud of their ancestry, they do not have much regard for borders. We free camped in the desert before Kandahah and went into the city first thing the next morning, the 28th April, 1978. The visit to Kandahah was short, we bought fuel and some fresh food. I loved the bread, it is a flat nan bread baked on hot stone heated from a fire beneath the floor. The bakery was very basic, there was a hole in the floor and the flat pizza shaped dough was placed on a large stone therein, the fire was beneath the stone, the baker using a piece of curved wire reached in and flipped the dough cooking it quickly on each side, for him very hot and monotonous work. It was very interesting to see them make it, I saw but ignored the bakers sweat as it dropped onto the bread, it must have been the salt required for the recipe and added to the taste. After Kandahah we headed north towards Kabul another 12 hour trip, this time on a good bitumen roadway, Grunt was in heaven, This road had been built by the Americans as an aid project, it didn't take a rocket scientist to work out what the World powers were up to. This road was also a pleasure to drive on, but on a regular basis we were stopped at roadblocks, the Police manned these and a small toll had to be paid.

When we were halfway to Kabul we overtook a very large convoy of Afghan troops also headed north, there would have been several hundred vehicles, trucks with troops, armoured cars and tanks. As we went past them they waved and smiled at us, we reminded our passengers not to take photos as we could end up in bother, as in most countries east of Italy it was frowned upon to photograph anything military or even other places such as bridges, railway stations, government buildings or even a plain old intersection, so we waved and smiled back. The soldiers had flowers hanging out of the barrels of their rifles, I thought this strange, hippies in uniform. I thought nothing of the convoy at the time, even after a further two hours on the road Grunt came across another Military convey of a similar size, this one heading south towards us. Again I thought nothing of them, again we smiled and waved as they did to us. These guys also had flowers in the muzzles of their rifles. I thought that they must have all been on the good Afghani hashish that we had heard so much about.

That evening we were driving through the hills that would lead us down into Kabul, we stopped for a loo stop some 20 kilometres from Kabul. It was dark and overcast and in between concentrating on where I was directing my piddle and not wetting my feet. I was looking at these strange flashes, like lightning coming the direction of Kabul. But, it was different to lightning, the light was coming from the ground up into the clouds above, I couldn't hear anything other than a low thunder sound.

The light show also caught the attention of the others, we all attempted to work out this strange display. One of the group, a university graduate, there is always one clever one on board, explained to us that it was refracted lightning. One other bloke, a farmer from Cooma in New South Wales said to me, "what a load of bullshit, he's a dickhead." I tended to agree on both, it was bullshit and he was a dickhead. But, still I had no idea what it was either.

Never the less, we pressed on into Kabul, driving old Grunt, not much could be heard in the cabin over the engine noise, this was also the case in the rest of the rear cabin, but to a lesser degree. We had a cassette player, microphone and PA system in the drivers cabin, just to the back of the drivers seat. This broadcast our voices and the music of the day to speakers in the drivers cabin, downstairs and upstairs.

I was driving and came across a roundabout after we had passed through what appeared to be an industrial area. I saw things on fire and tanks, it was only then I saw that the tanks were firing at things and lots of people running about. My first thought was "Shit! I'm out of here." I took the bus around the roundabout with the intention of going back the way I had come.

Grunt's interior lights were on downstairs and upstairs. The glare blind behind me was down, this was a screen behind the driver to prevent the interior lights reflecting on the inside of the windscreen. Grunt must have stood out like a Christmas tree, I made it around the roundabout and was confronted by lots of soldiers facing me with rifles pointed at the bus and me. I stopped the bus and heard yelling screaming from the back, I was aware that the soldiers were onboard, they entered by the back door. There were still a stack of them in the front, all in the light of Grunt's headlights and a few more trying to pull open the drivers door all yelling and screaming, I just sat there with my hands up and shitting myself. It was obvious that they didn't know how to work the handle or were too excited to even look at it. I opened the door and was immediately grabbed and dragged from the cabin onto the ground, I went down and stayed down. One of the

soldiers had his bayonet at my throat, it was attached to an AK47. They were still yelling and screaming, I had no idea what was happening inside the bus, I could only hear the movement of people and the yelling.

One of the soldiers had gotten up into Grunts driver's cabin, he leaned out holding the microphone of the PA system and with a big grin on his face yelled and screamed a stream of unintelligible words. I understood a couple of his words, they were in English. 'Americans', 'radio' and I thought he was saying that we were spies, but maybe that was my imagination. I was very concerned at the time, no more than that, I was still shitting myself, these guys seemed to be totally out of control. I had received a couple of kicks and they were still jumping about, yelling and screaming at me, they were all pointing their guns at me and gesturing with them with thrusts, all of a sudden they calmed down. A well-dressed soldier, he looked like an officer arrived he first spoke to the other soldiers and afterwards spoke to me in English, he was very calm. After explaining who we were and my demonstration of how the PA worked, he informed us that we were under arrest, by this time we were in the bus with the others who were all seated downstairs. John and the passengers looked as worried as I felt. Further discussions took place and I became aware that the officer didn't know what to do with us. It was eventually decided that we would be under arrest at the hotel where we had planned to stay, the 'Jam Hotel'. It was situated in the center of the city, just off Chicken Street, this was the area in Kabul where the markets and travelers hotels were located.

We were escorted to our hotel, on the way I was driving Grunt, I saw numerous fires, soldiers and military vehicles, but none firing their weapons, it all appeared to have settled down. The interior lights in the bus were now off as we didn't want to attract any attention. We arrived at the Jam Hotel I was guided in by John who had been there before. It was another of those enclosed hotels with large secure gates that were closed behind us, inside there was plenty of room to move the bus around. I was later to have three buses together in this same compound. The Jam Hotel was situated just off Chicken Street in the centre of Kabul, it also had a good restaurant that sold fantastic pizzas. I think anything would have been good after what we had been eating for the past 2 weeks. A guard for us was placed outside the hotel gate and we were informed that a curfew was in place.

Once inside and after speaking to the hotel bloke who spoke good English, it became clear to us what was occurring, connected to what he said, what we had seen that day on the highway and what we had just experienced it appeared that we were right in the middle of a civil war, looking back it could have been real trouble for us, but at the time it was interesting and business as usual. All through the night explosions, rifle shots and machinegun fire could be heard.

The following morning I received permission to leave the hotel to notify the Australian and English consulates of our presence. John and the female passenger carried British passports, the rest of us were Australian. After leaving the hotel I saw burnt out tanks all around the area of the Presidential Palace, there were also some bodies in the area, mostly soldiers but some civilian. It appeared that a cleanup was in progress as soldiers were removing the bodies. Armoured vehicles stood guard at most intersections, main roads and government buildings. I again saw flowers protruding from the muzzles of the weapons manned by the soldiers. After notifying the British Consulate I was directed to a house in the suburbs that was maintained by the Australian Government. There, I found the Australian High Commissioner for Pakistan, his wife and their 16-year-old son. They

informed me that Australia did not have a consulate in Afghanistan, but they maintained this house for consular visits. They also informed me that there had been air strikes in the area the night before and lots of windows had been shattered.

I joined them for lunch, they had an enormous freezer stacked with food, and I saw layers upon layers of frozen steaks. I thought of getting John and the rest of the group over to join me, that thought didn't last long, bugger them, I'm right jack. We had first class frozen steak, fosters beer and it was a very pleasant afternoon with very pleasant people. I was looking for a nap after that really nice meal and quite a few cans of fosters. While I was there the young fellow seemed to have a continuous grin on face, just like a kid in a toy factory. It appeared to me that he was enjoying one of the local products, hashish, he looked to be in seventh heaven. I was tempted to join him but that would have finished the day for me.

The High Commissioner told me that I could be waiting around for weeks for them to decide what to do with us. He also said that a Russian controlled faction of the Military had taken control of the Afghani Government. I told him of the two separate army groups facing off in the desert on the road to Kabul from Kandahah. The High Commissioner said that President Douad had been assassinated last evening with his family. Army officers entered the room where he had garrisoned himself with his family and asked for his surrender, he apparently shot each one until he ran out of ammunition. Afterwards he and his family were killed. I later leant that over 7,000 military and civilians were killed during this coup d'etat and that it was a spontaneous action undertaken by the Afghan communists.

I returned to the hotel in the afternoon and found the guard missing, the gunfire and explosions throughout the city had also ceased. I went with John and the passengers into town, I wanted to telephone or send a telegram to London to let them know our whereabouts and situation. I found that all communications outside Afghanistan were cut, we also went to the Ministry of Information, which wasn't that far from Chicken street, just to find out if we could leave. I was told by a guard at the gate to return the next day. That night was again spent at the Hotel, we were informed that a curfew still existed, there was some gunfire and explosions heard during the night again, but not as much as the night before. The following morning I returned to the Ministry of Information and found a soldier guarding the entrance, we were again denied entry, but he was very friendly. The soldier had an AK47 with a folding bayonet, he started to show off his skills by presenting arms, he was very proud of himself. He stood with the weapon standing alongside his leg and pulled it up to hold it front of his body, he repeated this several times with a big grin on his face. The last time he pulled up the rifle and the bayonet went straight into his cheek. Blood came out all over him and I left as nonchalantly as I could, it was one of the most difficult things to do, walk away from that and not laugh. That night was again spent at the hotel and it was a very quiet night, just before dawn the next morning, I steered Grunt out of the Jam hotel and headed for Pakistan, I wanted to get away before somebody realized that we were there and caused us some bother. The drive down Kabul gorge was one of the most fantastic drives I have ever experienced, in low gear for most of the descent, the scenery and the road winding down the gorge for what seemed like forever was unforgettable.

It took some time for Grunt to get to the border with Pakistan, the drive through this part of Afghanistan was totally different from the other parts I had experience, here was quite fertile with stone walls separating farms and paddocks and there were many more

people, plus the odd burnt out tank. The Afghan border officials informed us that as we had only transit visa's and that they were not valid from 30 April to 12 May. As this was the 1st of May our visa's were invalid. I attempted to explain our detention and the Coup. The officials didn't have the faintest idea of what John or I were talking about. The fines were paid, only a few dollars each for the visa infringement and we were on our way, I didn't want hang about as somebody might change their minds and have us remain. Grunt was a right hand drive vehicle and on the right hand side of the road. At the border between the two barriers we had to switch over to the left hand side of the roadway, this was a strange feeling, luckily there is little traffic on this border crossing, even though it is the major east west highway. I could imagine the confusion if it was busy.

I thought that the Kabul Gorge was fantastic, but the Khyber pass was also very inspiring but in a slightly different way, the roadway was more primitive and single lane covering both directions. It was a hot, hard and slow climb. The Pathan people control the entire area, they were and are a gentle but very fierce people, and I wouldn't like to get on the wrong side of them. As I drove through the pass, I saw men walking about and they all seemed to carry rifles, from Lee Enfields 303's, AK47's and very ancient ones that can only be described as being big elephant rifles.

After getting through the Khyber pass we passed beneath the archway of the Kyber fort where we had to report our departure from the area and into Pakistan. I think the area between the fort and the Afghan border belongs to and is really controlled by the Pathans as it appeared to have its own identity.

The trip was uneventful into Pakistan, just different and inspiring with the scenery, narrow roads and decorated TATA trucks.

The roads in Pakistan were wide enough for Grunt, when another vehicle, mostly buses or TATA trucks approached, both would move the nearside wheels off of the road and the vehicles would pass each other. This was to be the case all through Pakistan and India. The 'TATA' was the make of the trucks and that's how we came to describe them. Most of these trucks and buses were decorated with lights. These lights were the normal indicator, parking lights and Christmas type lights they had them all over the place and they flashed and sparkled as they traveled along, very pretty at night.

Grunt made good time through Pakistan via Lahore and into India, straight through India on the narrow roads via New Delhi, Agra and Varanasi. We managed a quick look at a few of the sights such as the Taj Mahal, but mainly it was just hard driving. The road through India took us through farmlands, cities, desert to the feet of the Himalayas and Nepal. Here we started the long climb up into the Himalayas. It was an amazing driving in low gear climbing all day, the radiator and motor overheating. To lower the temperature I leaned out through the window over the bonnet with the large kettles that we carried for heating water in the kitchen. They were brought into use to pour cold water from the kettle over the radiator. The water flowed down over the cooling tubes dropping the radiator temperature. John kept the kettles up and we continued to climb. John also drove his share on the long drives, he had learnt fast and could manage the bus with ease, I preferred to drive in the mountainous areas as it wasn't that hard to lose control of a Lodekka.

We came across a landslide after climbing into the mountains for 4 hours, the mountain above us had slid down taking the road with it into the valley below where a river flowed.

It must have been a thousand feet to the bottom and there was no way we were going to Pokhara the next location or Kathmandu our destination on this road. The Nepalese road workers were hard at it working and repairing the breach, I saw that they had moulded chicken wire into blocks about a metre high, a metre wide and two metres long. These were in place and tiered up in sections. The cavities in these chicken wire baskets were being filled with stones, all from the size of a cup to the size of a football. They had started this much lower than the breach and were building it up to create a new roadway and enable it to be supported. It was ingenious and made possible by the work of hundreds of little people performing all of this work by hand, the rocks were carried in baskets and they wore thongs over the broken ground. There was only a walking track across the collapsed roadway and the regular bus services were dropping people off on either side and they were being picked up on the other and continued on their journey.

John and I checked the map and it appeared that there was no other way to Kathmandu other than back to India and another route from India into Nepal to the east about a 400 to 500 kilometres drive from where we were. It was put to our passengers and they decided that they would take the local bus. It was here that we parted company and saw them off, I have never seen or heard from them again. But I believe they made it safely as if they didn't we would surely have heard about it.

Grunt, John and I travelled back down the mountain and when at a fuel stop at Butwal just before the India border, we again looked at the map and noticed a light line on the map running east inside Nepal through Chitwan a town called Narayangadh and joining with the other road at Hetauda that led to Kathmandu. We decided that this would be the best option and we should give it a go, as the other option had two border crossings and the additional kilometres, staying within Nepals borders had to save as at least two days.

We headed east towards Chitwan and came across a fast flowing river, the road ended about 100 metres from the riverbank, no bridge, but there appeared to be a ferry of sorts. We spent the night there and in the morning made inquiries on the best way across. The ferry consisted of two large wooden rowboats, joined together at the side with planks, the vehicles stood upon the planks, it didn't look that good to me.

The river was about 200 to 300 metres wide and it appeared to flood occasionally as there was a large area of about 100 metres of boulders to cross from the road to the waters edge. Grunt heaved, rocked, rolled and bounced down to the waters edge, Grunts belly and rear end scraped continually on the way down, John was constantly moving larger rocks away from the wheels and placing smaller rocks filling holes and gaps. The ferry fee was paid, John and I were hell bent on getting across this river, we didn't want to know about the alternative. There was no turning back and we just hoped there were no more rivers like this one.



Grunt was manoeuvred onto the boat tearing up the overhang at the back of the bus. Blocks and rocks had to be placed under the rear wheels to keep the rear end off of the ground. Because when the rear end grounded the rear wheels lost traction and just spun free.



Grunt finally settled down in place on the ferry, with the vessel much lower in the water but on an even keel. This was managed by a little back and forward movement of the bus, a real balancing act. Grunt weighed in at around ten tons, there was no way John or I were going to be in the bus for the trip across the river, which was flowing quite quickly.

The Nepalese boatmen, there would have been about forty of them pulled the boat upstream using ropes from the bank, with others on the ferry used poles to fend it off of the bank. When at the appropriate place the ferry was pushed off with us all on board and the ferrymen paddled like buggery and we crossed the river rapidly downstream and slowly across to the opposite bank. At times I didn't know where we were going as the boat spun about a few times. Our ferry and Grunt were finally pulled up by the crewmen with ropes being flung ashore. Again with much drama and scraping Grunt was able to alight from the ferry and we were off again, headed east.

Shortly after leaving the river we came across some Italian engineers, they told us that plans were in place for a major road and bridge to be built at this location, it was the survey for the project that they were working on as we spoke. I would expect that the road and bridge would have been completed and in use by now.

This whole area was sparsely populated, quite strange after traveling through India and that first section of Nepal where there were always people about, in this particular area I saw few people or settlements. The road was almost nonexistent in some places the area was covered in thick jungle. At one stage we had lost the road and had to go for a walk to locate the track, it was about this time that we came across some European tourists, they were on elephant back on a wildlife tour. We said our hello's and asked their guide if we were headed in the right direction, he said we were and Grunt moved off away from his ancient cousins. I have always wondered what those tourists felt seeing an English double decker bus in the wilds of Nepal.

That afternoon we broke free of the track and turned left onto the other way into Kathmandu, it was a bitumen roadway, just wide enough for the relieved Grunt. Grunt started the climb again up into the Himalayas as it did the day before, this time it was much more severe, the kettles kept coming in an effort to keep Grunt cool. On one stretch the road was a zigzag straight up the face of a mountain there were hairpins one after the other, Grunt barely made each one and I was looking at a long drop right alongside the tyre as we climbed and turned. I was in first gear for that climb and the turning circle of the bus only just made a couple of the bends.

After that climb I was able to stop and look back, I was so impressed I took a photo, that zigzag and the hairpin bends were something like I had never seen before, probably one of the most dodgy roads I have ever driven. The mountain road took us along the side of a mountain range for some distance, again the road was just wide enough for Grunt, on the drivers side was sheer mountain going up and the other side straight down, it was so far down I had no idea how far it could have been.

It was scary, there were stopping bays every kilometre or so to allow vehicles coming in the opposite direction to pass, if you met in the middle of two stopping bays, one would have to reverse. The traffic was light, but I did back up twice on the third occasion I stared out my opponent until they backed up. This road also had large dips, these allowed the water from the mountain to drain away quickly, but for Grunt they were a problem, the rear end caught on the roadway and left the back wheels spinning, this happened about four times, John and I had to jack Grunt up, put in blocks and rocks and get Grunt across the dips. In doing this we managed to rip off part of the rear panelling of the bus, this was a Top Deck manufactured panel and door, it wrapped around from the rear of the bus to the near side. It provided the entrance to the bus and covered the landing. This had been the open entrance in Grunt's previous life. The rear end panels and door were shoved down the aisle and we continued on.

That afternoon on the 10th of May, 1978 30 days after leaving London, Grunt delivered John and I to Top Decks eastern base, The 'Withies Hotel', Kathmandu, we were only 9 days late. John and I were met by 'Acko', Mark Atkinson and 'Moose', Bruce Maloney. Acko had a grin on his face as he always did and Moose had a dopey look on his face as he still does. They both checked us out as we turned into the front gate of the hotel.

Moose said, "What have you fucking done, you have fucked the fucken bus." It must have been the poor dopey look I gave him that caused Moose to relent and say, "Don't worry we can fix it." This they did.

John and I were exhausted, that afternoon after a shower, we joined Acko, Moose and the others for a few beers at the Withies. As it became dark we made the short walk into the centre, Durbar Square for a meal, my first introduction to Kathmandu. The restaurant was like nothing I had seen before, we sat on platforms alongside low tables where our food and drinks were served. Most people including us were smoking from water-pipes, at one stage Moose rolled up a large number using about 6 cigarette papers, as my experience with dope was very limited I was soon to learn the art of breaking up hashish and adding it to tobacco. We would later remove the tobacco from tailor made cigarettes, mix it with a small quantity of hashish and repack the cigarette. Later that evening on the way back to the 'Withies' Acko took me to a little shop that sold numerous types of hashish, what a place. I was starting to enjoy Kathmandu, life in Nepal was very peaceful but I was to return to reality the next morning when the serious work on Grunt began.

We were to depart Kathmandu with the three buses and a full complement of passengers in a week's time for the eleven-week trip back to London. During that period the buses were finely tuned with the necessary repairs and maintenance. All of the work was carried out on the grassed area at the front of the hotel, however the grass did in the coming years disappear and become a hard packed oil soaked surface. The passengers for the return journey were welcomed and given advice on what to do in Kathmandu prior to departure, some chose to help us with the work on the buses.

One day Moose organized a day trip for a few of our new passengers on an outing to a National Park, just outside Kathmandu. The outing was basically a picnic and a few beers in the nature and an introduction to the buses for the uninitiated. One amazing thing about beer in Nepal, it came in the large long neck beer bottle by the sack. They put about two dozen long necks into a hemp sack and it was sewn up. We would open up the sack, put the beer on ice and drink from the bottle. The picnic in the forest was a great success, we enjoyed the sandwiches and beer while we watched a whole tribe of monkeys, that is until they decided to take us on. They swarmed the bus grabbing at the food, there would have been at least 50 of them with the largest about 4 foot tall. We managed to get inside the bus and fend them off and make good our escape. I would have to say, even though I was well insulated with the beer, they scared me more than anything else on that trip.

A few days later we started the return trip to London, all didn't all go as planned, Moose's bus didn't make it out of Kathmandu. Acko and I took on his passengers and left Moose to fix his bus, he later caught us in Pokhara after about two days. Due to the delay in our departure we didn't manage it all the way to Pokhara and spent the night on the roadside. As Grunt could only accommodate a maximum of 22 for seating and sleeping, it was a little crowded with 30 on board. My usual spot on the make-up bed downstairs behind the drivers cab normally took two people, that night there were five.

The trip proceeded well to London, I started to gain valuable experience in overland travel, taught many lessons by Moose and Acko as the three buses didn't venture that far from each other, never more than a day apart. That trip went by way of Iraq, the only time I ever managed to get there, as with later trips we were not able to gain entry.