

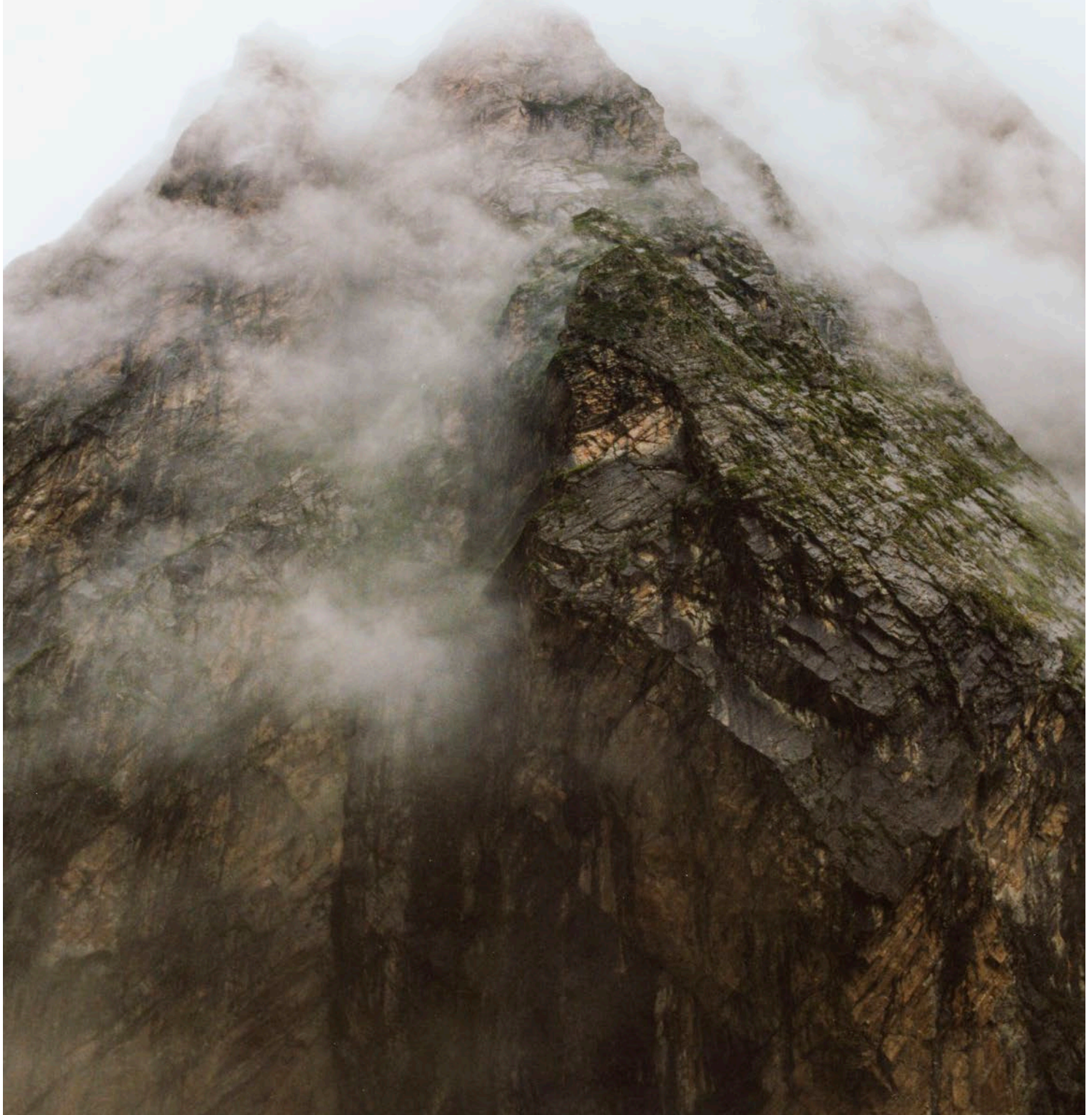
TRAVEL ——— REPORTAGE ——— Nepal

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Writer — Sarah Rowland

# MOVING MOUNTAINS

Nestled in the Himalayas, Nepal has always held craft and tradition in high regard. Now, a new generation is working hard to preserve its heritage and raise the future prospects of its people.





Previous spread  
1. Cloud-covered peaks

This spread  
1. Film-maker and textile expert  
Christopher Giercke  
2. River near The Happy House  
3. Villager in front of the house of Ang  
Tshering Lama's ancestor in Phaplu

“To make something unique, you need a number of things: passion, a void in the constructs of industrial time, talent, creativity, a sense for lasting design and, most importantly, a lack of fear,” says German film-maker and textile expert Christopher Giercke, a man who appears to live beyond the bounds of convention. Walking around his expansive workshop 30km outside central Kathmandu, it’s easy to recognise that he and this place have all of the necessary characteristics to make something special. Old-fashioned wooden looms clack as waves of brightly coloured threads are woven into bespoke cashmere blankets, scarves and homeware for his brand Altai-Himalaya.

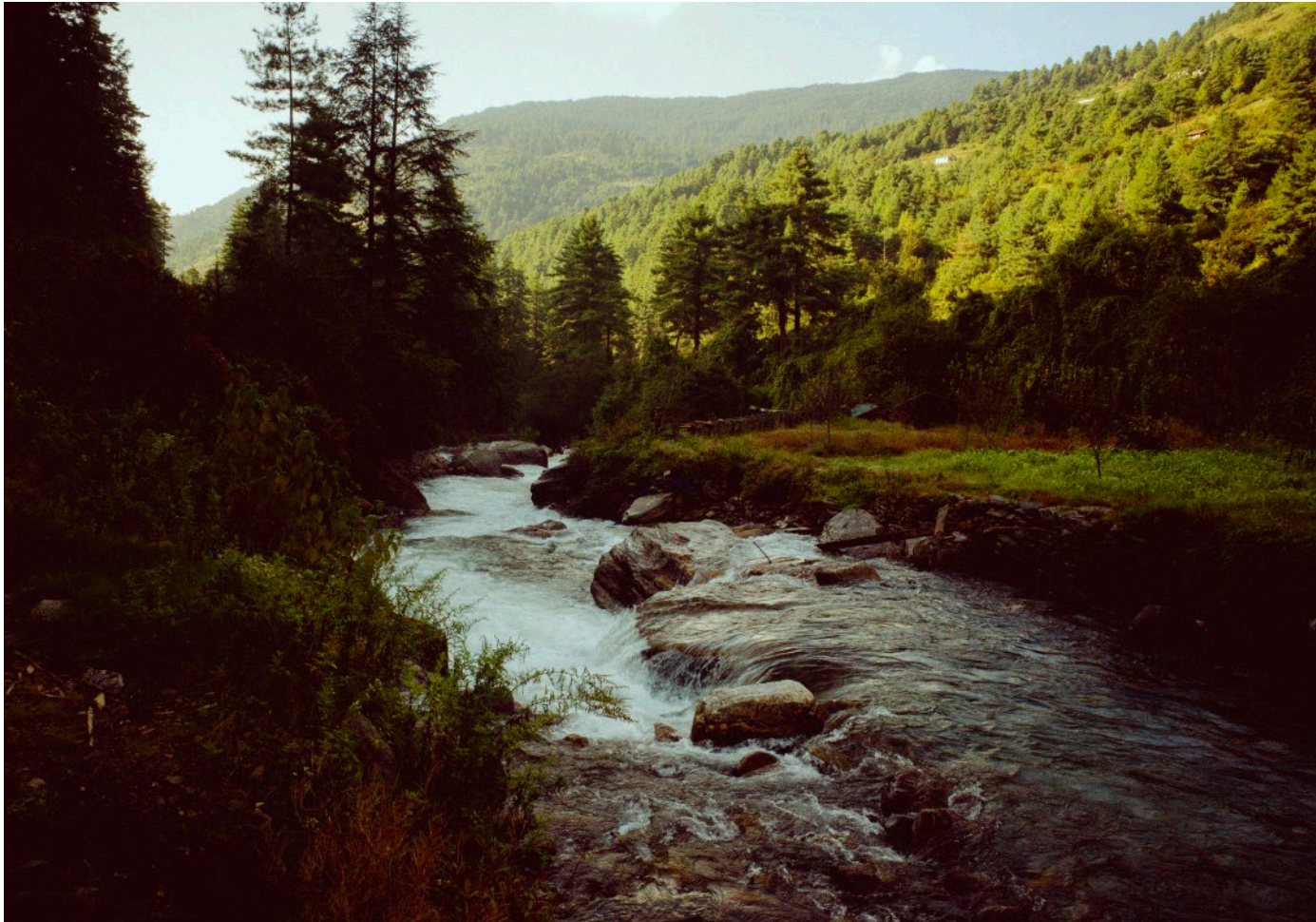
Today the workshop is run by his 26-year-old son, D’Artagnan, who is named after a character in *The Three Musketeers*, but Giercke still likes to get involved. “I call this business precious wool hunting,” he says. “I like to act as the conductor-musician. You know that scene from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* in which she throws everything into a pot and stirs the ingredients together? Even when you have everything, it’s still difficult to produce an end product at this heightened level of craftsmanship.” He pauses to button up his white, Italian-tailored overcoat and straighten his matching Borsalino hat. “I only have two outfits,” he says. “They’re both three-piece linen suits – one is white and the other is black with purple lining and matching arm patches of Hermès silk. It makes getting dressed much easier.”

Using centuries-old weaving techniques from the Himalayas, the atelier produces some of the world’s finest hand-woven wares and for fashion’s most iconic brands – in fact, Hermès is its top client. The wool comes from Mongolia and is brought to Nepal, where it is then spun, dyed and finished. “We couldn’t make this product anywhere else,” says Giercke. “Nepal is the only place for this kind of expertise in weaving and traditional handcraft.”

As we sit around the table with a creative crowd that includes Giercke’s wife, Enkhe Enkhtsetseg Sanjaardorj, who hails from Mongolia, and his lifelong Parisian friend Chaton Saconay, who served as art director of Hermès for more than 40 years, Giercke starts to discuss what has been happening in Nepal. “There is something very special to be found in the younger generation: people such as my son D’artagnan, D’artagnan, Ang Tshering Lama from The Happy House, and our friend Tsherin Sherpa, who is now a world-renowned artist,” he says. “They have spent time in the West but have chosen to come back home to



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create something unique. These boys could be anywhere in the world but they’re here. There is beauty in that.”

Giercke lights a Cuban Robusto Cohibas cigar and delicately lays it over a glass bowl marked with the logo of the 1998 Cannes Film Festival. “Perhaps young people have more of an appreciation for preserving the country’s long-held cultural legacies, as well as a talent for modernisation,” he says, explaining that Nepal is a nation of more than 120 languages, 142 ethnicities and about 10 religions.

Giercke first came here in 1985 to produce the film *Lord of the Dance, Destroyer of Illusion*. It was made in a Buddhist monastery built by a Sherpa of Tibetan heritage, Sange Lama, in the remote village of Phaplu in the Mount Everest region. While filming, Giercke met Sange’s great-grandson, Rinzing Pasang Lama (known as RP) and discovered The Happy House. It was also here that his passion for Nepalese textiles and art began. “We were filming at the monastery and we ran out of gasoline,” says Giercke. “I heard that this man named RP had some, so I trekked down to his house. I arrived at this picturesque villa that felt so deeply cinematic. *This* was Hollywood. I had found it out in the middle of nowhere.”

Cinematic is the perfect word to describe the The Happy House, a place that in its lifetime has served as the home to some of the world’s earliest explorers and expeditioners attempting to climb Mount Everest. To reach the retreat, visitors must take a 10-hour journey on unpaved roads or brave a short helicopter ride from Kathmandu. After choosing the latter, *Konfekt* arrives at the bottom of a long pathway of stone steps, which leads to the building’s grand entrance. Colourful prayer flags fly high above, rhododendrons line the stone walls and the home’s resident canine friends greet us enthusiastically. “It’s challenging to get here,” says Ang Tshering Lama, The Happy House’s current proprietor and son of RP, as we’re ushered through the front door. “But aren’t all the best places a little removed from reality and ease?” he asks and explains that the village only had roads laid seven years ago.

Inside, the walls are covered in traditional Tibetan *thangka* paintings, which were commissioned in the early 1970s by Khapa Rinzi, a Sherpa and master painter who filled the space with birds, gods, flowers, rivers and wheels of life. Simple Italian writing desks are situated in every corner. Cashmere blankets are artfully slung across plush chairs and burning logs flicker in the fireplace. Low-hanging pendants and natural

1. Weaver at Altai-Himalaya using a wooden loom
2. Stupa near The Happy House in the Sherpa village of Junbesi
3. Blanket receiving its finishing touches in Altai-Himalaya’s finishing room
4. Living room of The Happy House
5. Ang Tshering Lama outside The Happy House
6. Chiwong Monastery, built by an ancestor of Ang



candlelight from butter lamps cast the main living spaces with a warm glow. Bronze statues from Lalitpur in Kathmandu Valley, which is known for its rich artistic heritage, line the shelves and mantels. The aromas of traditional *dal bhat* (lentil and rice curry) from chef Mingmar Sherpa’s kitchen spill into the living room as it cooks slowly in an antique copper pot. This is a place that forces you to take a step back in time.

Today, The Happy House exists as a boutique hotel but it’s also a space for connection. Serving as a jump-off point for adventure and cultural immersion, guests are invited to participate in Buddhist blessing ceremonies at Chiwong Monastery or head into the mountain villages to see traditional Tibetan rugs, singing bowls and copper wares being made. There are also trekking trails that take you through Sherpa villages, past fields where yaks stand placidly and to mountain base camps, following the footsteps of the region’s explorers. Luxury camping is also available; guests hike alongside local Sherpas, only stopping for candlelit dinners beside glacial rivers and sleeping under the star-filled Himalayan sky.

The house preserves an extraordinary history and serves as a beacon for what it means to be a Sherpa. “There’s an extraordinary story that exists within these walls but there’s also a future that we want to invest in,” says Ang. “What many discover when they come to the Himalayas for the first time is that the mountains change you. They reveal the compassion of their people, lessons of kindness and gratitude, age-old wisdom and an ancient cultural identity, which we’re hoping to preserve for the next generation.”

The Happy House was built with help from explorer Count Guido Monzino, who led the first Italian expedition to summit Mount Everest in 1973. His journey was one of history’s most extravagant: he hired a team of 6,000 porters to carry his finest wines, silver cutlery, Italian gambling tables and plush leather sofas high into the Himalayas. In that same climbing party was RP, Ang’s father.

“This was the count’s home during his early trips to Everest,” says Ang. “What exists as The Happy House now was partly his vision, an ode to Sherpa culture mixed with a bit of Italian opulence. Many of the items that he took on that first trip to Everest are still here, including his gambling table, the sofas and the chairs. These items all hold a unique history.”

It’s hard to believe that the family nearly lost this property. In 1996, when a communist uprising swept through Nepal’s rural mountain towns and ravaged the country, RP took his family and one suitcase of

possessions and fled to the US. As they settled into life in Queens, New York, Giercke moved his family into The Happy House to make sure that the place wouldn’t get abandoned or damaged. “It had a history that simply couldn’t be lost – my children were all raised there and we spent many beautiful years calling it our home. It’s a true place of stories,” says Giercke, explaining how he moved aside in 2017 when Ang returned home and converted the house into a hotel and founded the Beyul Experiences (*beyul* is a Tibetan word for a place where spiritual and physical worlds collide). Today the company offers some of the most authentic travel in Nepal.

“Very few places are as wild and remote as the Himalayas,” says Ang, as we chat over a lunch of yak cheese, *momos* and *kur* bread in the house’s verdant garden. “These mountains have attracted explorers, adventurous travellers, nomads, pilgrims and even deities seeking transcendence. This place served as the paradise of my childhood. Now feels like the right moment to share it with others.”

The guesthouse is at the heart of Ang’s work but he’s not just trying to build a bespoke tourism experience. He is also working to address some of the biggest challenges facing the Himalayas, such as the growing need for education, healthcare, village empowerment and the disappearance of rich cultural traditions. “We have to urge outsiders to see the beauty of this remote part of the world, which includes our traditions, our legacy and our future,” he says. That’s why he recently launched a creative-residency programme alongside artist Tsherin Sherpa and The Himalayan Art Initiative, which hosts painters at The Happy House and invites them to explore the region’s traditions, giving back to local communities through school art programmes and exhibiting work in a gallery-style showroom. Nepalese artists Pooja Duwal and Sara Tunich Koinch are in attendance when we visit.

The house is becoming a space for artists to exchange ideas. *Konfekt* meets Tsherin, the only Nepalese artist to have had his work exhibited at the Venice Biennale, where he showcased his paintings alongside traditional handcraft, including brass work and an installation of wooden weaving looms from Phaplu. “The degradation of *thangka* started in the 1980s, when it became a souvenir product instead of a revered art form,” says Tsherin, as he shows *Konfekt* the vibrant paintings on The Happy House’s walls. “I was reluctant to follow in my father’s footsteps and become an artist because I saw no hope for the future of art in Nepal.”

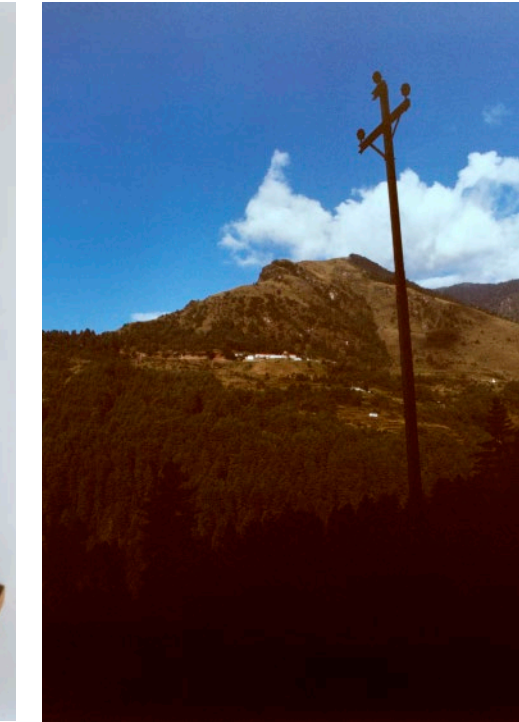
Things changed for Tsherin when he left Kathmandu for the US and developed



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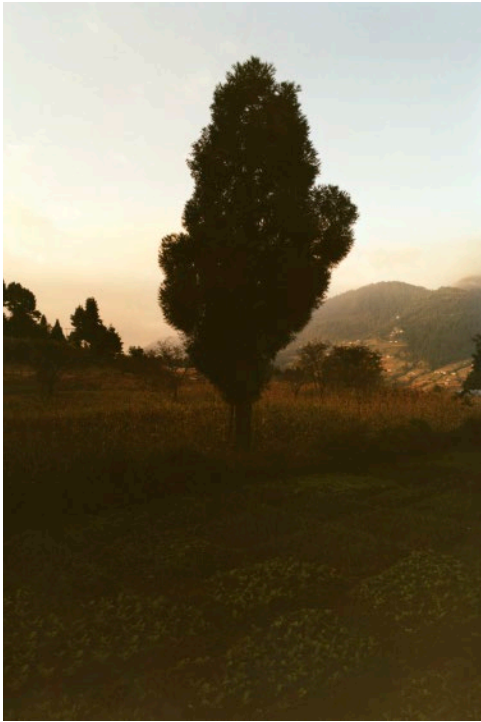


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a new-found appreciation for his art. Today, his work can be seen in galleries across the world. Now he passes on traditional *thangka* skills to young artists at his Kathmandu studio and helps other artisans – everyone from woodworkers to brass crafters and weavers – find an appreciation for their talents. “Our heritage is fragile and it is quickly disappearing,” he says. “To change this, we have to create opportunities for Nepalese people and bring global attention to the intricate creative skills that are part of the region’s multifaceted history.”

Ang also started Phaplu’s Mountain Bike Club, building 13 bike trails on the surrounding land. It is now led by Mingma Yangzi Sherpa, one of The Happy House’s most adventurous members of staff and a true example of what it means to be a modern-day Sherpa. “Our hope is to give young children in the area a place to go after school, help them discover a new hobby or even train them to lead biking tours, which can be a great source of income,” says Mingma, who is an accoladed mountain biker, climber and outdoor adventurer.

Born into a traditional Sherpa family, Mingma grew up in a modest home with no technology and no access to the outside world. She eventually left to train as a nurse in the city. “Life here was difficult and I always had dreams of leaving the village,” she says. “I remember having so many chores: gathering water, picking corn to make flour, bringing the goats in to milk. Our home is a beautiful place but there’s often no way to earn a living or to pursue your dreams and aspirations. So I left, like so many young people do. But when I did, I found myself missing home so much.”

Joining The Happy House finally allowed Mingma to find her purpose where she wanted to be. Phaplu has now become a premier biking destination, which is bringing more jobs to the area. “Most kids in the village don’t have the opportunity to stay here even if they want to but Ang has shown me that we can create change in the community that we both grew up in and love. We are the ones who can shift the narrative.”

Then there’s the Beyul Center for Arts & Culture, whose flagship project is cultivating a weaving community in Phaplu. “D’Artagnan and Christopher’s workshop, Altai-Himalaya, is the guiding light for the Phaplu project,” says Ang, as he shows *Konfekt* a stack of Tibetan-style rug designs from their first production. “It’s the pinnacle, in terms of the world’s best craft workshops.” The Gierckes are now teaching Ang how to source the best materials, train

weavers and create an exceptional facility where they can hone their skills. Now with 10 spinners on wooden hand looms, they have set out to revive an art form that was one of Nepal’s largest exports until the Maoist insurgency of the 1990s.

“The key to these programmes is collaboration,” says Ang, as we stroll along the dirt roads in Phaplu’s village centre. “To change the community, we first have to change ourselves. As I see it, The Happy House is the centre, or the sun, and every unique project is one of the sun’s many rays.”

As we stop to admire the mountain peaks glowing on the horizon, Ang explains that creating new opportunities is the route to saving the country’s cultural heritage. “This is Nepal’s battle to fight,” he says. “My hope is that we can create even the slightest paradigm shift. All of it matters: the art, the legacy, the handcraft, the weaving, the Tibetan-Nepalese techniques, the cultural identity, the past, the present and the future. By keeping all of this alive, we’re making sure that our story, the story of Nepal, is one that stands the test of time.” ——— K

- 1. Chef Mingmar in the kitchen of The Happy House
- 2. Young monk at Chiwong Monastery in Solu Khumbu district
- 3. Restoration project of the first home ever built in Phaplu
- 4. Sherpa woman in traditional dress
- 5. Chaton Saconay
- 6. Staff members of The Happy House



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**The Happy House: Hillary’s haven**  
Legend says that The Happy House was unofficially named by Edmund Hillary during his many adventures in the Solukhumbu region. “As a young boy, I remember him coming to visit many times during his expeditions,” says Ang Tshering Lama. “Our home was built on the pathway to Everest Base Camp, so everyone had to pass by on their trek into the mountains. He always said that this was the happiest house, which stuck with me.” Not only did Hillary use the house for expeditions but he also continued to come back year after year to help cultivate schools, new transportation systems and hospitals – Ang was born in one of them – for these small Sherpa villages. “Without the hospitals, women like my mother would have traditionally walked for three days and then taken a 10- to 12-hour drive to Kathmandu for delivery. Hillary gave us so many conveniences that weren’t here. That made a deep impression on me. I can only hope to continue the legacy.” *happyhousenepal.com*



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