

Volunteers report – Naomi Cairns 2011

From April - May 2011, I volunteered in Gorkha, Nepal, teaching English at the Shree Mahendra Jyoti Higher Secondary School, and I can honestly say it's one of the best things I have ever done.

As my plane first touched down and I stepped out, I remember even the smell of the air was different and I instantly knew things were going to be very different to England. But I soon got used to the hustle and bustle of Kathmandu, and the owners of Shree Tibet Hotel were very helpful and friendly and they will go out of their way to make sure you are ok, and have everything you need.

After a few days in Kathmandu I travelled to the Chitwan National Park which is in the south of Nepal near the Indian border about 4 hours bus journey from Kathmandu. I decided to do this before going to Gorkha as it was April, so starting to get hot as this is pre monsoon season and so reaching up to about 40 degrees in this area. It also gets very humid as the monsoon approaches. I stayed in the tourist town Sauraha, visiting the Tharu villages, going for an elephant ride in the jungle, and visiting the elephant breeding centre is a must.

The local bus ride to Gorkha took about 5 hours, even though it was suppose to take only 3, but it only cost 290 Rs, so I wasn't going to complain. The bus ride in itself was an experience and I had a little baby sit on my lap for most of the journey, as well as this several goats were crammed down the aisles! Gorkha town was much bigger and more developed than I had expected. When I arrived in Gorkha the hotel was fairly easy to find and even if you can't find it, most of the locals are happy to help.

Before I went to Nepal I had been lucky enough to attend one of the English GDHED meetings, so I could find out what the charity's aims are and what they are already doing. I also read through the website information and this gives you a good insight into what they have already done. Within an hour of being in Gorkha I was invited to the Nepali GDHEDs meeting which was a bit of a shock and I didn't understand too much of what was being said as they were speaking in Nepali. They did speak in English for a few bits and they translated the important bits for me to follow. I found it very interesting to see things from their side of the charity, and what they think about what the charity is doing.

The next morning I moved in with Perusothem Aryal's family. At first it was all quite daunting, and it takes a bit of getting used to their way of life, but everyone is welcoming and you very quickly get involved with the things they do. It is very easy to make friends, and there were lots of girls of a similar age to me who were happy to show me round. The only problem is the language barrier as it is quite hard to speak to them. It is great if you can try and pick up bits of the language as it makes it easier to talk to them, and it also makes them extremely happy. Before I left I bought a Lonely Planet Nepali Phrasebook, and this was a great help as I learnt a few bits about the language before I went, and was constantly referring to it whilst I was out there. I'm not sure I would have survived without this book, as sometimes I had to show them the word because I could not pronounce it correctly! I do think it is better to live with a family in their home rather than the hotel, just because you can get more involved with the community, and you can really see how their day to day lives are.

Whilst I was there the daughter of the host family was getting married, this was a great opportunity for me to see a traditional Nepali wedding, and I also got to help with the wedding preparations, helping prepare food, cooking and making leaf baskets. This was great because I got really involved and socialized with all the women in the family and those from the neighboring houses, as everybody comes to help with the wedding as it is such a big event. I felt very privileged that they allowed me to help with this, and it was a highlight of my trip.

They eat daal bhat (vegetable curry, rice and daal, which is like lentil soup) morning and night, which to start with was great as it is something new. However, after being there a few weeks it is quite hard to eat the same thing every day and to eat so much rice because the diet is so different to ours. They do sometimes make meat curry, but I would recommend sticking to vegetarian food, as they use and eat every single part of the animal including all organs and bones, and because the meat is just left hanging outside all day. So a visit to the hotel for something a bit different is quite nice. They do all sorts of things such as chips, omelet's, fruit muesli, pancakes and much more. Or you can buy some eggs and cook them at the house.

After being there for a few days I went up to the school to have a look around and meet the headmaster Laxman Archana. The classrooms are very basic, with wooden benches and unpainted walls, but they do have whiteboards which is a good improvement from the blackboards as it isn't as dusty. During my first week I sat in several classes, of different ages (6-16) and levels, and with different teachers, and I assisted with a few of them to get a feel for what it was like. I felt that this was the best way to do it, as you could see which classes and teachers you were more comfortable working with and which would benefit more from your help. I thought that I could be the most help with the younger classes, and taught classes 4, 5 and 6. They were very interested to learn and seemed to respond more with the things I was teaching them.

One of the best pieces of advice I can probably give is be prepared for anything, it is very spontaneous teaching, and it is best not to expect anything and go with the flow of it. Thinking on the spot for ideas and things was also quite a big part of it. With the younger classes I worked with the teachers to come up with ideas on how to make lessons more interactive. The way they teach there is very lecture style like, and the curriculum is set in stone, but with younger children the best way to get them to learn is to engage them with activities, and get them involved in the class more interactively. I took over some teaching materials with me, such as colouring pencils, crayons, and several packs of picture and word cards. I got these from cheap shops in the UK such as Poundland, Wilkinson and other similar shops, so it was cheap but still great. I didn't give these out until I had been there a couple of weeks so I could decide who was the best person and classes to give them to. The children loved the colouring pencils and the cards, and responded to them very well in the lessons, so these are great things to take over there. It was also quite nice to teach them a few English songs, they love to sing and dance so it was nice to see the children so happy, and it also improved bits of their English and confidence within the class.

Unfortunately I didn't get to visit the campus or the hospital whilst I was there, as I and everyone else was just too busy. But I did visit the Gorkha Campus which was interesting. I met several of the lectures who were very interested in the charity and wanted to know all about England! Through this university I met an English lecturer, who was part of the organisation NELTA (Nepali English Learners Teachers Association).

He invited me to one of the special English classes for gifted class 9 students. I was very happy to help in the class, and it was nice to see students so interested in the language, and the teachers for this class were excellent, and trying all different methods of teaching, and were happy for me to give them suggestions of how to improve their way of teaching.

Overall I think this trip to Nepal was a great success. I had an amazing time, made great friendships, and gained another family. The Nepali have made a lasting impression on me, I think I gained more than I have given them, and I cannot wait to go back!