

Jan Raven - Nepal Blog – March 2012

After spending almost 5 years studying for a major qualification I was looking for a challenge in my life. Combining travel with an affordable and rewarding volunteer programme was exactly that. Just over 2 months after graduating I boarded a plane that was to take me on an adventure of a lifetime.

Coming into Kathmandu was magnificent, blue skies and a row of snow capped mountains guided the plane into the airport, a small bustling place that wouldn't return my incredibly heavy case until I had rummaged in my bag for the luggage stub handed to me at Heathrow.

The competition from the taxi queue didn't surprise me and after successful fare negotiation my luggage was squeezed into an old battered Suzuki and my trip across the 'city' began. I wasn't quite prepared for this, bad roads, no pavements, bikes, motorbikes and cars cutting across everywhere. More helmets than I expected and most passengers wearing face masks against the pollution and dust.

The hotel was in the Thamel area which is very busy and bazaar-like with people moving between cars. I was scared about getting lost so I walked 50 metres one way then back past the hotel then 50 metres the other way until I felt confident I wouldn't get lost. Funky Buddha rang a bell and it had free wifi so I sat in a candle lit garden and had a beer and spicy pork dish while catching up with UK life on my iphone.

At 6.30am the next morning the taxi dropped me off at the bus station with my 28 kilo case and hand luggage. So many people offered to help but I was too nervous and clutched my stuff, I really needn't have been so nervous, I soon realised that everybody was friendly and helpful, putting my bag on the roof and giving me a seat behind the driver. The gaily painted bus stopped continually while leaving the city so the conductor could drum up business for the bus, many people, bags of grain, large drums of cooking oil on top and inside. Then music played loudly on this crowded vehicle as we left the city and moved into the lush green countryside on our 6 hour journey.



Ghorka was once the capital of Nepal and is quite a large town built on a slope, very populated in the lower parts with less houses as the steep steps climb up to the Palace. I had travelled on to Ghorka so quickly so that I could be present for a school celebration and how wonderful it was. Children danced, accepted sponsorship and listened to speeches and I sat on the stage with the local dignitaries. I just hope they didn't notice my jet lagged moments.

I spent two sessions of 10 days in Ghorka working with children in the Shree Mahendra School, a three story building with no glass in the windows. The students were so receptive, we played word and colour games and taught each other songs and dances. I spent much time with some of the teachers, the headmaster and meeting with charity committee members.



During my stay I was made to feel so very welcome by everybody, often being invited to share their food cooked in their one roomed homes. I spent part of the time staying at one of the local hotels who looked after me and showed me some local crafts and traditions. Most of the rest of my stay was with one of the families that have been affiliated with the charity since Joy started it. I also spent one night in a remote village with one of the teachers from the school who was especially friendly and helpful to me during my stay. As my visit was just before the start of the rainy season electricity was spasmodic but apparently the hotel now has a generator.



While I stayed in Ghorka I rarely saw other foreigners and was very noticeable when moving around the town but always felt comfortable. School children would always call hallo, everybody wants to talk to you even if it is to practice their English. I day tripped to Manakamana where an enormous cable car takes you high into the mountain to a village with a wonderful spiritual temple, such an amazing experience.

Pokhara, where I spent 5 days trekking and sight seeing, was found to be far more commercialized. A change in bus destination nearly had me lost but the conductor sorted me out another bus and was determined I wouldn't be fleeced by the taxi drivers threatening to smother me! A guide was summoned by the hotelier to come and meet me and he and I hiked into the mountains for 3 days staying in lodges where I met other trekkers and shared nepali experiences. A lack of British people attracts you towards any you do see.

Back in Kathmandu, I was shown some amazing sights, famous temples and landmarks by one of the young teachers from the Shree Mahandra and I found a hidden treasure of my own in the reconstructed 'Garden of Dreams'.

Bargaining is brilliant there, I brought some great souvenirs back but nothing could equal the wonderful memories I have. This has truly been the most incredible experience of my life and I can't wait until I go back again.