

Olivia Power. Volunteering in Gorkha Nepal, 10th February 2015 to 28th March 2015.

I can safely say that the voluntary work I did whilst in Gorkha, Nepal was one of the best experiences of my entire life. Nepal as a country was nothing like I ever expected to be, one of the best pieces of advice I received whilst out there was from another charity volunteer who told me 'not to go into any situation with any prior expectations'. Because something always happened that would surprise you, make you laugh, make you sad or give you a whole new outlook on Nepalese culture and the way the people live their lives.

Arriving in Kathmandu was nothing short of the biggest culture shock I've ever had. The cab journey from the airport to my hotel was an experience to say the least. Kathmandu can be very noisy, overcrowded and overwhelming. But once you get past the initial differences it's got a wonderful charm to it. I loved the beautiful historic buildings and houses covered with stunning carvings, Swayambhunath Buddhist temple with hundreds of monkeys running around it and studding views over Kathmandu and Durbar Square both sadly partly destroyed by the earthquake.

Gorkha town itself was a wonderful place. Every morning I would wake to stunning views of mountains and you could see the Himalayas from the children's park view point at the top of the town. I lived in a home stay through the majority of the visit, I stayed with Lila Maskey, her 9 year old daughter Jenisha and Lilas father in law who I referred to as Grandfather! The family were incredibly welcoming, kind and generous. Most days we would eat dhal bhat tarkari (rice, lentils and usually vegetable curry) three times a day. This did get rather monotonous after a few weeks!!

Whilst I was in Nepal I was volunteering for The Gorkha Development Scheme I was primarily involved with teaching, taking part in hygiene projects in local schools and organising projects that the charity were involved with.

It is very upsetting to think that all the projects I was involved with and helped to create whilst I was volunteering in Gorkha are now on hold. But painting a school seems to be the least of the charities worries, when we don't even know whether the school is still standing.

The Gorkha Development Scheme is now aiming to do as much as they possibly can to help with disaster relief in Gorkha. Myself and those who work for the charity have been able to contact the vast majority of our friends and loved ones in Nepal and know that most are safe and well, but some we still have not been able to account for. The charity is now aiming to do as much fundraising as possible and will work with their sister charity in Gorkha to know where to best direct relief efforts. I feel that it is very important that people are aware of the efforts of smaller charities in Nepal as well as the larger ones. The majority of the aid effort in Nepal at the moment will be concentrated

on Kathmandu, but there are many small villages, towns and communities in the surrounding areas that will be far worse affected by the earthquake but have no way of communicating or may now be inaccessible. Gorkha district was at the epicentre of the quake and from pictures and communications I have received from a few Nepalese friends has been very badly affected.

Teaching

Whilst I was in Gorkha I volunteered in a variety of different schools, and worked with children of all ages from 4 year olds to 18 year olds. The lessons that I was mostly involved with were English ones. The majority of the schools I worked in were government schools where the children are taught the entire curriculum in Nepali, and only have their English lessons taught to them by English speaking teachers.

There were also lots of private schools in Gorkha where for the fee of equivalent to £10 a term, the children are able to receive a significantly better education. Private schools teach their entire curriculum in English, and I tended to find that 10 year olds from private schools could speak far better English than 17-18 year olds from government schools. The influx of private education in Gorkha meant far better opportunities for the children of families who could afford them. But it meant that you tended to find lower cast, poorer and female (who tend to be less valued than males) children in the government schools. Because of the better standard of education in the private schools I dedicated my time to the government schools as I felt they could gain more from my being there.

My favourite school that I spent the most time in was Mahendra Jyoti school, which had an incredibly forward thinking and well organised head teacher Laxman. At Mahendra Jyoti I mostly worked with Class 10 who were 14-15-16 years of age. The class was split into two sets of higher and lower ability. I must admit I preferred working with the lower ability class, although they may have struggled with their English at times they were far more outgoing and willing to get more involved with the alternative teaching techniques I was using in their lessons. Their normal lessons would consist of reading a section of English writing in their textbook (which was usually about 10 years out of date) and then completing a very dull task afterwards. In my lessons I tried to move away from this as much as possible as I could see they found it dull and were not gaining the most from their English lessons as they could. I would begin my lessons with a tongue twister like 'peter piper picked a piece of pickled pepper' which would not only work on their English pronunciation but would also make them laugh and create a happy light hearted mood in the classroom. It was a really good icebreaker particularly as sometimes I was just as nervous about teaching them as they were about me; it's a big responsibility being left with your own class but so rewarding! I also taught them about writing and structuring a letter and essay writing and couldn't believe it when they said that none of them had ever sent an email or a facebook message.

When I taught the younger children I always made sure to make their lessons as fun and creative as I was able to. I would often take their lessons outside in the playground as some of their classrooms were dark and unpainted and not particularly inspiring places to learn in. This, before the earthquake, was something that the Gorkha Development Scheme was aiming to change, with a project proposed to paint the classrooms and Mahendra Jyoti. With one very young class of 4-5 year olds I had a lovely lesson outside where I taught them English nursery rhymes and songs, they adored learning the Hokey Cokey. I also took a play parachute to Nepal with me and donated it to one of the schools when I left Gorkha. The younger children absolutely adored using this, on one lesson I had the entire school coming out to watch me and the children using it!

Living as part of a Nepalese community was amazing. They do so much together and are so neighbourly. All the children still play together and it was so refreshing to see young children outside playing and having fun rather than being attached to a television or tablet screen. It was a very safe place to live; there was no single time throughout my entire trip where I felt uneasy, threatened or unsafe. After a week or so of living with my family I didn't even feel the need to lock my bedroom door. Men and woman alike are very active within their community, I spent time with the Gorkha Women's Association who do charitable deeds throughout the community, and run the charity's Hygiene Program. Different families and casts also have their own traditions and ceremonies which I had the privilege of being invited to attend.