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The Official Newsletter of Projects Abroad Nepal

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Life in Bharatpur

By Kaye, Tram, Jasmine, Xiang Yih

When we were told to meet in the hotel lobby at 6am on the morning of our departure for Bharatpur, we thought that we'd have enough time to pack in the morning before we left. What we didn't account for was the frequent and unexpected power outages, which left us packing by torchlight. We were then led through some of the narrowest and pitch black alleyways of Thamel lugging our heavy suitcases behind us to the bus stop, guided only by the sound of the suitcase in front of us.



Our five-hour bus trip was surprisingly comfortable. We made our way along the winding road, through some of the most scenic mountain and river landscapes we had ever seen. Eventually, the road became flat, and we arrived in Bharatpur, with its brightly coloured houses, wide roads lined with fruit stalls, sunshine and greenery – a massive change from Kathmandu!

Our group was blessed with a wonderful host family, the much envied jackpot of electricity and hot water and our very own backyard buffalo. Despite the language barrier, we were



able to share many broken conversations with Rashem (our host father), who also taught us some Nepali phrases. We found our host mother's dal bhat to be one of the most delicious comfort foods we've had so far. Khamala (our host mother) found it amusing watching us try, and fail miserably at skinning the snow peas for her curry each day.

Each morning, we found that there was no need to set an alarm as the temple next door, without fail, would begin their morning service at 5.30am which begins with bells before tapering off into an hour long snooze of

invigorating prayer accompanied by drums that is broadcasted across the entire district. We would then spend our morning at Chitwan Medical College Teaching Hospital shadowing doctors and getting a feel for the Nepali health system.

Getting around in Bharatpur is an experience by itself. By foot, we always attracted attention from the locals and it was only a matter of time before we were quickly accustomed to the regular shout-outs of "Hi!" and "Where are you from?" from the local Nepali kids en route to the hospital. Some of the gutsier ones would come right up and demand a photo be taken, before running back to their giggling group of friends with an air of achievement. It is probably not recommended but do at least try to walk home after dark at least once (not alone of course). The air is clear with few cars on the road, the temperature just right in winter, and it may well become a pleasant experience navigating through pitch black roads under a clear night sky with by torchlight and a few distanced glowing street lamps.

Riding on a tuk-tuk is definitely an experience in itself; this very efficient and affordable form of transport invites you to share a cozy ride with up to 10 other people all in the space of a square metre, which isn't an issue once you embrace the Nepali concept of "personal space" and boundaries. However, we found the best seat is actually sitting on top of the roof or hanging off the back outside with the best views and the wind rushing through your hair. This is particularly advisable for our taller friends or you might find yourself desperately cushioning your head away from the metal roof to avoid a potential concussion with every passing bump on the road (and there are plenty).



During our stay, we were fortunate enough to experience the Maghe Sankranti festival, which only comes around once every two years. The doctors from the hospital were kind enough to take all the Projects Abroad volunteers to the festivities where we all squeezed on a raft which was half filled with water under all our weight to cross the river. There, we waded into the river to be cleansed of all our sins before enjoying a traditional street meal of sal roti and other Nepali delicacies.



Our first weekend off was spent in Chitwan National Park, where we explored the local Tharu villages and various exotic wildlife species. We were lucky enough to witness two wild rhinos grazing by the river, before sitting back to watch the sun set over the jungle. We had a number of unique and exciting experiences, including a misty canoe ride on the Rapti River, trekking through the jungle, an elephant-back safari, all culminating in an invitation to bathtime with the elephants. A few

of us were crazy enough to take up the offer, thinking that the water would be warm. We were immediately proven wrong when the first jet of cold elephant-spray hit our faces... and we were forced to endure a cold and wet jeep ride back to Bharatpur.

Nevertheless, our experiences here in Bharatpur have been something that we will never forget and only halfway through our placement, we're sure we'll have many more adventures still ahead.

Intoxicating Kathmandu

By Elaine Prescott

From the moment you fly into Kathmandu, you know you have arrived somewhere different. If you are lucky and arrive during daylight hours and have a window seat, you will normally have your first view of the spectacular Himalayas before you pass through the layer of smog and see the city for the first time.

Once out of the airport, you are overwhelmed by the chaos. Whether it is the people pushing you into the tiny waiting taxis (barely big enough for two western people in the back!), the madness of the roads with motorbikes

zigzagging between the cars (at first sight, there appears to be no road rules) or the dust of





the road side construction that seems to be happening everywhere. It may sound odd, but these are often the things that people remember fondly when they return home! Kathmandu, as with the rest of Nepal is an intoxicating combination of cultural, history and natural beauty and it can take weeks for some to really get their bearings in amongst it all. If you are only in the country for a month, you could easily occupy all of your weekends exploring the temples and back streets of Kathmandu, really getting to the heart of how the people go about their daily lives.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, Thamel, the tourist hub can give you the taste of home that you may crave at times. Plenty of bars for you to enjoy a drink, and restaurants offering you all the tastes of home you may desire. Of course, there are also 100's of shops which will satisfy the urges of the most addicted shopaholics!

Intoxicating Kathmandu will somehow find a place in heart no matter how hard you resist!



Ankur Counseling Center – Child Safe Workshop

By Travis Copeland

So one of the most common questions I like to ask our volunteers when they arrive here is how they decided on Nepal as their volunteer destination. I have to admit I'm a bit disappointed that 80% of the time the answer, at least in part is "because it was the



cheapest destination on the list". As I myself came to volunteer here in a children's home for three months in 2011 separate from Projects Abroad, and now having lived in this country for over a year, I sometimes wonder if volunteers have any idea of what they are getting themselves into by choosing Nepal. For me, it was a life changing experience where I

immediately fell in love with the kids that I spent my days with, the monkeys that surrounded my house and offered endless entertainment, and the amazing people that live in a world of poverty most cannot even imagine, but will open their homes to you offering you somewhere to sleep and the food off their table. I can remember the managers of the NGO sharing with me that they had a genuine concern for my ability to adapt to life in a

developing country as Nepal became my first passport stamp, but ultimately they said I took to Nepal like a fish to water.

Nepal is a very unique destination and volunteers should realize that this country is so much more than the cheapest destination on the Projects Abroad list! By signing up for a tour of duty here, you are accepting a position in a developing country that is still facing many struggles and problems that will most



certainly affect you while here. However, in addition to being the birth place of Buddha, Nepal is home to many UNESCO World Heritage Sites, offers some of the best trekking in the world and has a dazzling culture and history so rich and vibrant that you can't help but fall in love. Anyone that comes here will definitely leave with a broader mind and experiences you will gain nowhere else which will certainly never be forgotten. In addition to the magic and mystery of ancient temples and traditions, there are some very serious daily issues that can occasionally leave volunteers experiencing culture shock. As soon as you get through the airport you will notice crowds, traffic, pollution, lacking roads, severe poverty, and mothers with their children begging from tourists. It is an unfortunate initial view as you come through the famous Kathmandu Valley, but it is a reality that we must all learn to accept in some way. Due to the common problems of culture shock to anyone traveling to poor, developing countries and our awareness of this condition with some of our volunteers, our Country Director Sajani Amayata in collaboration with Ankur Counseling Center have developed a new "Child Safe" Workshop that will be conducted monthly for all of our Care and Teaching volunteers. As we enter this New Year it is our goal to better equip our volunteers with the skills to handle exposure to the realities of life outside of the western world. This workshop was put together specifically for volunteers here working with children as they will certainly see some big cultural differences in regards to parenting, discipline, teaching, and problems of child trafficking and abuse among others.



The first Child Safe Workshop was a huge success and with a total of 15 attendants we had a full house. Our wonderful facilitator Chhori Laxmi Maharjan, a Senior Counselor at Ankur who for about two hours presented us with slides, lead discussions, guided group activities and even provided us with the opportunity to tour the center and spend some time in the three different therapy rooms. She explained to us that there are many

different types of therapies offered at the center and how they specialize in counseling for children as well as training and educating when possible. Even though there is still a stigma attached to Psychological Counseling in Nepal, since opening in 2006, Ankur has counseled over 300 children and has provided more than 40 trainings to over 700 people who work with children! The workshop was designed with group interaction in mind and the volunteers were eventually split into two groups and given different tasks. The first group was asked to discuss and come up with “Experiences and Observations” that highlighted some of the major differences here in Nepal as compared to Western Worlds. This group was the first of the two to present their results and developed a list based on their experiences at the Care and Teaching placements which included fighting, discrimination, discipline, and the caste system that is still present in this country that had the volunteers in disbelief. In some cases the lowest caste is not allowed to speak to higher caste, touch



dishes used by upper caste or even be in the same room with higher caste. On the other side of the room, group two was asked to discuss and create a list of “How you are helping the children” which obviously was a nice follow up to the negative topics initially presented. The second group had some amazing responses and their presentation included “Teaching them to communicate and express themselves, Exposing them to different cultures and the idea that there are different

ways of doing things, Helping the kids develop confidence and encouraging them in their learning abilities”, and my absolute favorite from a volunteer in a disabled home “Learning to look past their disabilities to see and treat them like normal teenagers”. These volunteers made me so proud because sometimes people have misguided ideas that they are going to come save the world and bring about huge change, but really sometimes the kids just need you to sit with them and give of yourself through simple human interaction. Sometimes it’s the simplest things that you do that will have the most profound impact on the amazing kids here and it will open their mind as well as yours in ways you never imagined!

Based on the lists generated in these first groups, I think it’s evident to all of us that this is an immensely valuable and much needed workshop. We will continue monthly with this for our Care and Teaching volunteers and would like to say a special thank you to everyone involved and keep up all the great work everyone! Sure, Nepal may be the cheapest on the list because it’s such a poor and developing country, but it’s a hidden treasure and the work being done here may be more rewarding and needed than the most expensive destination, so for whatever reason, just keep coming my friends; we have lots to do!