

# USEFUL INFORMATION



Volunteering in recent years has developed into an industry. Often paying considerable amounts of money to help, volunteers end up doing things they didn't expect; are embarrassed when are asked for donations; and leave unsure whether they have been much help. Many organizations provide placements and a good service, offering value for money for their support, but this isn't always the case. Rural Assistance Nepal (RAN) doesn't charge but does not pretend to offer much service other than information. You need to be fairly self-sufficient and cover your expenses like transport, food and lodging.

Volunteers help for different reasons. It shouldn't have a negative impact on the people receiving help. Unfortunately, some communities receiving volunteers see it as a way to make money. RAN does not encourage this and tries to work with people who do not ask. If you want to donate, obviously you are welcome to do so. But if in doubt, feel free to ask or consider donating via RAN.

On the other hand, the benefits of volunteering can be huge. Skills and ideas are shared that continue to be used after the volunteer has long gone. The volunteer usually comes away changed. Being aware and sensitive to local culture, being flexible and open-minded, volunteers can contribute in many positive ways.

This document covers the following:

- Budget: hospital placement charge to medical students; travel expenses; accommodation and food; (Tamekoshi Cooperative Hospital, Ramechapp and Deusa school, Solukhumbu).
- How to get to volunteer locations
- Before you go: visa and money
- Arrival: arrival form; visa on arrival; baggage; taxi to the hotel; extending your visa
- What to bring: torch; first aid; local sim cards; money
- Food and drink
- Transport and getting around
- Weather
- Culture shock: how to cope: ethnic groups/caste; religion; language; dress
- General tips
- Dangers and annoyances
- Volunteering at a school
- Trekking
- Feedback, safeguarding issues

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## BUDGET

RAN does not charge anything to volunteers. However, if you would like to donate to the school or hospital, or Rural Assistance Nepal, your help is always welcome.

**Hospital placement charge to medical students:** Medical students are expected to pay the hospital the Nepal rupee equivalent of 20USD per week for their placement. The money goes to help Tamekoshi Hospital pay for medicines and health camps. (In Kathmandu, medical students pay 50USD a week to hospitals).

**Travel expenses:** Transport in Nepal is not very expensive. Road and air travel are the only options to most places. However, air transport is not recommended due to air safety concerns (Nepal does not meet EU safety standards). Buses are very cheap, costing a few pounds for several hours' journey. A shared jeep to go to Deusa costs under 20USD (one way) and a jeep to Manthali costs about 5USD. To enable funding go further that helps pay for healthcamps run by Tamekoshi Hospital, volunteers are asked to help by contributing towards the cost of their transport to the villages where the camps are held. This typically comes to about 15USD.

## Accommodation and food

RAN has arranged a discounted rate at the following hotels in Thamel:

- **Tibet Guest House** – Thamel (Jack Gurung [tibet@mail.com.np](mailto:tibet@mail.com.np)) offers free airport pick up. Standard rooms cost 15USD single/18USD double including taxes <https://www.tibetguesthouse.com/>.
- **Hotel Yambu** - Thamel (Raj Bhatta [hotelyambu@gmail.com](mailto:hotelyambu@gmail.com)) offers the same rates and airport pickup <http://www.hotelyambu.com/>.
- **The Glasshouse Hotel** in Asaan, a few minutes' walk south of Thamel doesn't offer any discount, but Antony ([theglasshousehotel.np@gmail.com](mailto:theglasshousehotel.np@gmail.com)), a former British A&E doctor who used to work in London can offer a good quality and cheap dorm beds (breakfast included) for about 8USD a night (single/double rooms cost 25USD).

To get a discount, mention you are volunteering with RAN. Cheaper hotels can be found, but you usually get charged on top the 10% service + 13% VAT, and transport from the airport costs about 5USD.

Budget on about 7-10USD a day for food while staying in Thamel (not including drinks).

**Tamekoshi Cooperative Hospital, Ramechapp** - The hospital has basic accommodation in twin bedded guest rooms (a few rooms may have more beds) with attached bathrooms behind the hospital. There is a staff canteen providing meals. When you are on a medical camp or working at a healthpost you might be put up in a family home, but this is not normally possible in Manthali (and not encouraged). Accommodation is charged at 5USD per night. You need to budget on up to 10USD a day for food and lodging.

**Deusa School, Solukhumbu** - For volunteers going to Deusa, there is accommodation sometimes available near the school in family homes and there are a few basic local lodges or 'hotels' not far away. Allow up to 10USD a day to cover food and accommodation.

## HOW TO GET TO VOLUNTEER LOCATIONS:

### Manthali, Ramechapp

Shared jeeps go to Manthali leave every hour from about 6am until 2pm from Koteshwor jeep stand near the airport (Ring Road junction). Jeeps take 4-5 hours to reach Manthali and cost around 5 USD one way. Tickets available without pre-booking or Dr Suman ([skarma\\_2005@yahoo.com](mailto:skarma_2005@yahoo.com) tel: 9744016277/9841400271) can call them to reserve if you know the time you want to catch it.

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Dr Suman typically comes to Kathmandu on a Friday, returning to Manthali early on Saturday morning. If you want to get a lift with him, contact him directly to let him know where you are staying. He is very familiar with the Tibet Guest House and Hotel Yambu and both offer easy access for the ambulance vehicle.

### Deusa, Solukhumbu

Shared jeeps go to within a few minutes walk from the school now. Leaving Kathmandu early in the morning (5am) from Chabhil, it takes 8 hours to Salleri and a further two hours to Deusa. Contact Lal Rai, a friend from Deusa (9841452970) at Namaste Trekking Shop near the Hotel Yanbu, (opposite and down from Pilgrims Garden Guest House in Thamel) who can help you book your ticket (20USD).

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR MEDICAL VOLUNTEERS

**Types of nurses:** Medical volunteers are likely to meet several kinds of nurses, who often work as almost doctors in the rural healthposts.

- Staff nurse - 2 years+ training, less often found at healthposts but more likely found in rural hospitals;
- Health Assistants (HA) - 3 years training, more qualified and senior to CMAs and AMNs;
- Community Medical Assistant (CMA) - 18 months training, focus on pharmacy;
- Assistant Maternity Nurse (AMN) – 18 months training in midwifery;
- Medical Health Worker - 6 months training.

**Government District Hospitals** - Nepal has 65 district hospitals in Nepal and a few larger 'Zonal' hospitals. There are many hospitals in Kathmandu, but not so many outside the city. Few doctors want to work in the rural areas. Government hospital services are poorly resourced with limited equipment and medicines.

**Community Hospitals** - Community hospitals charge a bit more than the government ones, but usually offer better care. They rarely perform deliveries as only government hospitals and birthing centres pay for women to deliver there, part of a successful incentive to avoid mothers giving birth at home.

**Healthposts** - Rural healthcare tends to be rudimentary to the point of almost non-existent in some places. Sub-healthposts are being upgraded to become healthposts and birthing centres are being set up.

Cases recorded at Deusa healthpost over a few months showed the most common ailment was 'headache'. Gastric, skin problems, sore eyes, throat and chest infections are also common. Working in a healthpost, it is important to refer patients to the nearest hospital when nothing can be done by the healthpost. Medical volunteers can help the local nurse convince patients of this need. Sadly, often villagers take more notice of a foreigner than a Nepali. Patients pay for all of their medical care: registration, tests, medicines, bed, operations etc. Patients' family bring food and go to the pharmacy. Nursing staff do not provide care.

Government doctors tend not to want to work outside the city. Some doctors have to work in rural areas for at least two years to pay back government scholarships, but usually leave as soon as they can to work in Kathmandu or abroad. Government doctors' salaries are relatively low, about the same as a secondary school teacher. Most doctors Kathmandu have a private practice to supplement their income, or work in a private hospital.

At the hospital, medical volunteers help local staff see patients who come to OPD. Nepali nurses can usually assist with translating, as their training was in English and although they are often shy to speak, they will usually understand if you speak slowly and clearly. The doctors invariably speak very

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good English. Medical students doing their medical elective are supervised by a doctor from the hospital.

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The following information has been collected from personal experience, volunteers and Nepalese who have worked with volunteers.

#### Before you go

**Book your flight**– Book as soon as you can, as prices invariably rise the closer to your departure date. There is a general shortage of seats as most are taken by migrant workers mainly travelling to the Middle East. Hence better value deals can often be found with Turkish Airlines, Jet Airways and any that avoid the Middle East. Currently Oman Airlines offer good deals. High season is in autumn and spring.

**Visa** – You need a tourist visa and now this is easy to apply for online, saving you long waits at the airport on arrival (you pay on arrival). Apply at <https://online.nepalimmigration.gov.np/tourist-visa>. You need to upload a passport photo and enter your address in Kathmandu. This asks you for the house number (not compulsory), ward number (29 if you are staying in Thamel). VDC/Municipality and Municipality are both 'Kathmandu'.

For stays of two months or more, you are recommended to apply for a 90-day visa (100USD). If you are staying up to 30 days, this visa costs 40USD. However, if you are staying longer, then you have to extend your visa in person at Immigration in Kathmandu, involving a few hours and possibly two journeys in the day to the office that is located quite a way out from the centre of the city. Also, the cost is calculated for extra days with 25USD charged for anything up to 15 days, and then 2 USD per day for the remaining days of the month.

So, a stay of seven weeks for example would cost 40USD for the 30-day visa and then 25USD + 26 USD (13 x 2) = 51USD. With all the hassle involved, the 9 USD saved by not getting the 100USD 90 days visa is not worth it.

Print out the receipt and present this at the bank counter at Tribhuvan Airport on arrival with your payment. If you don't apply in advance, don't worry as you can do it at the airport. Sometimes there are long queues however. It is NOT recommended to apply to the Nepali embassy in your country, as not only will the visa usually cost more, but there are untold stories of lost passports or lost payments. You are only allowed to stay in Nepal up to 150 days per year starting January 1 on a tourist visa.

**Money** – Nepali rupees are unconvertible, and you cannot get them in advance. There are ATM machines in Kathmandu and even Manthali, but lately there have been a lot of problems with foreign bank cards. Nabil Bank and Standard Chartered seem to work, but most of the others are not. This might be a temporary problem (it has been a problem for at least a year now though). It is recommended that you change cash. Any hard currency is easily changed in Kathmandu but NOT easily outside here and Pokhara. Pounds Sterling, Euros and Dollars as well as most other currencies can be changed at money changers in Thamel. In particular I recommend East-West located very near the Kathmandu Guest House in Thamel as the owner is a friend from Deusa and I have always found them professional and received very good rates. Banks tend to be very slow and not as competitive. Do not bring travelers cheques as banks and money changers no longer change these.

#### Arrival

**Arrival form** - You may be given an arrival card on the plane, otherwise complete this on arrival to the lounge before you get your visa. You will need to hand this in with your visa payment receipt at the final Immigration counter where they put your visa in your passport. On leaving, you need to complete a similar departure card that you find before Immigration and the security check.

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**Visa** – If you did not apply in advance, there are machines at the airport and people to assist you. The machine takes your photo. You must pay in hard currency for your visa. I try always to pay in US dollars as the rate of exchange is never good here for £ Sterling or Euros. However, any hard currency is acceptable. The visa takes half a page but is accompanied by an entry stamp.

**Baggage** – At present, before you reach the baggage carousel, you have to put your hand luggage through the security x-ray which is less about security and more to check returning Nepalis are not bringing in anything that might be liable for tax. Welcome to Nepal and the chaos of the baggage pick-up hall!

**Taxi to the hotel** – If you have booked with the Tibet Guest House or Hotel Yambu, provided you give them details of your arrival time, they will have a complimentary taxi waiting for you. The taxi drivers will be lined up outside with cards displaying your name. If, however you have nothing booked, drivers will pounce and try to charge whatever they think you might pay. 500Rs or about 5 USD should be enough (it's half by meter but they are very reluctant to ever use their meter). There are ATM machines at the airport and if all else fails, you should be able to change some cash on arrival to your hotel if you are unable to get any Nepali rupees. You need to walk about 200m down to the car park to get to your vehicle.

**Extending your visa** - If you do have to extend your visa at the Immigration Office in Kathmandu or Pokhara, be aware some immigration staff might ask a fee to speed up the processing (which should be the same day in all cases), or some other scam. They might try to sell a more expensive multi-entry visa when you don't need this. Be sure you know what you expect to be charged (see above), have all your documents ready and don't pay bribes as this encourages corruption. If in doubt, request to see a superior officer. When dealing with officialdom, be patient, take a good book and if you appear nonchalant and prepared to sit it out, you will find that you won't have any problem. This is why if possible, it is easier to get a 90-day visa if you are staying more than one month.

### WHAT TO BRING

**Torch:** A good head-light for reading at night or visiting outside bathrooms is always useful. Powercuts in Kathmandu are still a problem if only for an hour or so at irregular intervals. Always know where your torch is located during the evening and at night while sleeping.

**First aid:** Read the medical chapters in guide books and buy medicines in Kathmandu for the most likely problems like giardia and other intestinal problems. Clean cuts right away. Don't pass out medicines to the people if you're not a doctor, even if Nepalis want to treat you as one if you have any medicines. Try to encourage the use of health posts by the locals.

**Local sim cards:** Most easily purchased in Kathmandu, there are two main telecommunication companies but NCELL is the easiest to get a sim card and data packages. Coverage in the hills is sometimes poor, but NCELL works well in most places. You need two passport photos to complete the application form for the sim card and shops in Thamel sell them. There is slow Wi-Fi at the hospital's administration office.

### MONEY

Hard currency will not be usually accepted outside Thamel or Lakeside in Pokhara and if accepted, is usually at a poor rate. Nepalese people also have a hard time changing hard currency to rupees. Banks in small towns outside Kathmandu generally find it all but impossible to exchange foreign currency and have to call to Kathmandu to find the rate of exchange. However, there are many ATMs in Kathmandu and slowly, more and more outside the cities.

In Kathmandu, try to change as many large 500 and 1,000NRs notes into smaller notes as there is always a problem with change. You will invariably be asked if you have smaller change, but don't give in. They can get it easily enough in the city, but outside it is much more of a problem.

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Like anywhere, you need to be careful, but Nepal is probably less dangerous than most countries in the world (whatever you might read in the Lonely Planet).

### FOOD AND DRINK

**Water:** Do not drink or brush teeth with untreated water in Nepal. Treat all water. At hospitals, boiled or filtered water is generally readily available, but not at schools. Water is unsafe everywhere you go. Whatever locals say, spring water is not 100% pure. Tests prove that even water from ground springs is usually contaminated to some degree. It is best to drink boiled water (easy at the hospitals). Mineral water in bottles is available in some places though the plastic bottles pose a problem in terms of the environment and the purity of bottled water can be suspect (tests suggest up to 10% of bottled water is contaminated in some way). Otherwise use a water filter or treat water with iodine. However, when water is said to be filtered, don't trust it (unless it is by a Euroguard filter), as normally filtering won't have removed some of the more serious water-borne nasties. Help avoid adding to the huge problem of plastic disposal by using your own bottle. Plastic recycling in Nepal is next to non-existent and disposal is a serious problem here.

**Tummy bugs:** Many volunteers suffer stomach upsets at some point during their stay. Hygiene isn't a priority so be careful where you eat and be prepared with rehydration salts. Restaurants in Kathmandu tend to be fairly safe. Outside of the city food is more limited in choice.

**Dal bhat:** (rice with dal soup and vegetable curry, (sometimes meat) is generally eaten twice a day at around 10am and 8pm, with a light snack meal around 3-4pm. Most people are not vegetarian, but meat is usually reserved for special occasions. It's more commonly eaten in the villages in the spring when there are fewer vegetables available. Usually chicken, pork or maybe mutton (usually goat) is eaten but never beef as cows are sacred. Be careful of pork which can carry parasites and unless cooked very thoroughly, can be a problem.

It is safer to be vegetarian while in the village and means that your hosts don't feel obliged to serve meat that otherwise they would not have eaten if they did not have guests. Also, most people do not have refrigerators and so it can be a good idea to avoid meat to be on the safe side.

Dhendo is served as an alternative to rice. Like a heavy polenta, it is flour cooked with water making a mash and served with vegetable curry. Regarded as 'poor' people's food, often your host won't offer it.

Pickle (achar) is served with dal bhat. A mixture of garlic, tomato, chilli, ginger, or be pickled vegetables or fruit. It can be quite spicy if a lot of chili has been added! Dal bhat might be served with raw cucumber, radish or carrot. Be careful it has not been rinsed with untreated water.

Typically, 'snacks' are eaten in the late afternoon; dinner is often eaten quite late, at around 8pm or a bit later. (Usually everyone then goes to bed straight after their evening meal). Snacks might include biscuits, potatoes boiled in their skins with a spicy pickle, noodle soup, some chow mein etc.

Milk comes from cows and buffalos, availability of the latter in the village depending on whether there is a calf. Buffalo milk is much richer than cow's milk. It is pasteurized by boiling and may be left to cool and also will be made into yogurt or curd, with the whey making a refreshing drink.

Usually people eat with their right hand. Ask for a spoon if you don't want to eat with your hand. Before eating, people wash their hands with water provided in a small metal jug. Your left hand is your 'dirty' hand, so you must eat with your right hand (even if you are normally left-handed).

**Nepali tea:** Served everywhere, sugar is usually added to the milk and tea, 'cooked' all together. If you don't want it sweet, you can ask but usually need to wait longer as it will have to be made specially.

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## TRANSPORT AND GETTING AROUND

Try to use public transport in Kathmandu. It's very cheap and easy (and great fun) as long as you know the name of your destination. Most people know some English, so it is not difficult to get about. Fares are from 17 cents depending how far you go. Big buses, minibuses and tempos (little electric vehicles that carry 10-12 people) ply all over the city. Taxis are expensive and will usually try and ask about twice what you would pay on a meter, especially if you get them in Thamel where they charge much more than if you catch one outside.

Travelling in Nepal is by bus or jeep and very cheap. A five - six hour bus journey on a local bus won't cost more than about 5USD. Journeys tend to be long and slow as the roads everywhere are in a poor condition. This is worse during the summer months when the monsoon can lead to landslides and mud that slows if not stops the progress of buses in the more remote areas. Although driving is perhaps not as bad as in some places (like India), going anywhere by road can be quite hair-raising! It is not advisable (nor legal) to sit on the roof of buses, though outside the cities quite often drivers allow passengers to go on the roof when the bus is too crowded. There have been many cases of people being killed when they have hit electricity lines or other obstructions.

### By air

Be aware that Nepal air safety is poor (the EU has banned Nepal airlines from European airspace). Flying therefore, is very much at your own risk and RAN does not advise it. (A volunteer with a Nepali doctor lost their lives in an air crash flying from Kathmandu to Jumla, a remote area in the north of Nepal a few years ago). Increasingly, as the road network is developing, many of the small airfields are becoming defunct. For example, Kangil Airport that used to be the closest to Deusa is now closed.

Flights serve many of the hill districts where there are small airstrips. Aircraft tend to hold about 17 passengers. Some fly daily, but often fly only a few times a week. Ticket prices are quoted in US dollars but payable in Nepali rupees. Foreigners pay a much higher fare than Nepalis, but airlines hold seats till the last minute for foreigners. Obtaining tickets except for Lukla is rarely a problem. Be prepared for cancellations and delays. Mountain weather is unpredictable and there can be days when flights are cancelled. Flying domestically is not very safe, especially in the summer monsoon. Note that due to air traffic congestion at Kathmandu, flights are now going to Lukla from Manthali.

Check-in for domestic flights opens at an hour before flight times. Domestic terminal is a ten-minute walk from the main international terminal. There is no longer an airport tax on international flight tickets, but there is for domestic flights, (about 160NRs), payable at the airport before check-in.

Luggage allowance on domestic flights is 20Kg **including** hand luggage. Excess is charged per kilo.

On returning to Kathmandu, luggage is transported behind your bus from the plane and you collect it by the entrance to the air terminal. Remember to keep the tag given to you at check in for checking when you retrieve your bag.

### By road

There are two main bus stations: Old Bus Park (Purano Bus Park), near Ratna Park in the city centre for buses east; and the New Bus Park on the Ring Road north of the city for buses to Pokhara, Chitwan, and far west. There are also several 'unofficial' pick-up points for jeeps at Chabhil (for Solukhumbu) and Koteshwor (for Manthali).

Tourist buses to Pokhara (and Chitwan) leave every day at 7am from Surha Kuti, five minutes' walk from the north side of Thamel, near the Hotel Yambu.

There are several types of inter-city transport: minibuses, buses and shared jeeps.

Minibuses - slightly more expensive, but usually a bit more comfortable than local buses.

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'Local' buses ('express' or 'super express') pick up passengers along the way and get crowded.

Tourist buses to main tourist destinations like Pokhara. The Greenline bus includes lunch and is the most expensive (18USD one way to Pokhara or Chitwan). Other cheaper tourist buses are not much different, but don't include lunch and stop at reasonable restaurants on the way (7USD).

To go east, the 'superfast express' that leaves Kathmandu at 6:30am stops at fewer places, taking the shortest time to reach Jiri (usually arriving around 1pm). The other buses stop along the way; and the micro bus tends to travel more slowly, as the road is rough.

Try to book your bus ticket a day in advance. Prior to major holidays like Dashain, much longer is needed. It is advisable to avoid travelling at these times as the majority of the country will be on the move for this holiday. Allow 30 minutes to report at the bus station prior to the bus departure time. Journeys usually take longer than advertised: jams, breakdowns, accidents, landslides etc.

Nepalis are often poor travelers and travelsick. Buses come prepared with plastic sick bags, but you might want to take one just in case.

Toilets are few and far between, often involving a stop by the roadside although this is fast improving. There will usually be at least one or two stops at a restaurant for food and refreshments where there are toilets available. These are usually squat toilets but are clean.

Lunch stops tend to be around 10-11am and usually will be at a restaurant mainly serving dal bhat and maybe a few other choices. Vendors sell snacks like slices of cucumbers, bags of fruit in season and other food. Be aware the cucumber may be sprinkled with untreated water.

Try not to get too dehydrated while travelling on long-distance buses.

### **On foot**

Apart from the southern plains in the Terai, there is little flat terrain. Be prepared for walking up and down. A walking pole can be useful for the steep ascents and descents that might be slippery.

Elastic time and distances: There is little concept of time in Nepal. If you ask how far a place is, it is generally measured by time rather than distance, but any time given will be based on a super-fit, unladen Nepali man walking fast. (Personally, I add an extra 50% to whatever time I am told: a Nepali's 3 hours, becomes 4 ½ - 5 hours; 5 hours is 7-8 hours and so on.)

Trekking is the reason why most people come to Nepal. Going to many places will usually include some hiking along trails. The standard of lodges will be basic unless on a trekking route.

Depending where and when you go, a sleeping bag can be useful, though not necessary as lodges always have clean bedding if you are also going trekking. However, a sheet sleeping bag is not a bad idea. Bedding in tourist lodges is clean, but in the peak trekking season might be in short supply as guides and porters would not generally carry sleeping bags.

Remember that the trails are in effect roads between villages, so be careful to give way and make room for porters carrying heavy loads.

### **Weather**

The best times for trekking are in October-November and February-May though the winter at lower altitudes is also good. In the places where you are likely to be volunteering, there is not usually any snow. In April and May there is an increasing chance of brief pre-monsoon showers. Temperatures and humidity start to rise by May. From towards the end of June until the end of September, the monsoon means rain most days for a few hours, but not all day nor every day. Usually there are short heavy downpours, especially in the afternoon. Humidity will be high. Temperatures can reach 40C degrees+ in the Terai plains in the south of the country during the summer, but the temperatures rarely go much above 30C in Kathmandu and less in the hills. During the monsoon,

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trekking can be made uncomfortable by leeches. Salt is the best remedy. Avoid brushing undergrowth and watch out if standing in the wet for any period of time.

### **CULTURE SHOCK: HOW TO COPE**

#### **Ethnic groups/caste**

Nepali people belong to many ethnic groups, with the addition of castes, or social levels not only within the ethnic groups, but also with a pecking order between ethnic groups.

With some ethnic groups, caste is very important. In general, it is a bit less important among the hill people. Caste is generally much more important to the Indo-Aryan Brahmins and Chhetris.

Brahmins (priest caste) and Chhetris (warrior caste) are at the top of the social hierarchy. Both these ethnic groups make up about one third of the population and are from Indo- Aryan origins.

There are over 65 ethnic groups and over 100 languages. Some of the lowest groups – formerly referred to as ‘untouchable’, are now referred to as Dalit or by their ethnic group's name, like Kami (metal worker). These are the poorest and, in many communities, still the most discriminated against (despite laws to the contrary). They make up 10 - 15% of most communities.

Newars tend to live in the Kathmandu Valley and are often business people running the shops and small businesses. They have a very long and rich culture as the architecture in Patan and Bhaktapur testify to. They have migrated all over the country over the centuries, so it is common to find small communities of Newars almost everywhere. They form approximately 5-6% of the total population.

The main ethnic groups in the hills are of Tibeto-Burman origin, such as the Gurungs, Rais, Magars, Tamangs, Sherpas and more. They are characterized by their flatter facial features and often stocky build. These groups form 3-4% of the population respectively (5% Tamangs and 0.2% Sherpas).

#### **Religion**

Most people are Hindu, though many of the mountain people are Buddhist. However, there is a lot of overlap between the two. Some ethnic groups are a mix of the two and also animist. There are many festivals and rituals. Superstition often directs the way people behave. In many countryside areas, shamanism is still strong, as a belief in spirits and many people are very fatalistic. There are minority Moslem and Christian groups.

In the mountains there will often be many walls, stupas, small shrines along the way, and out of respect, you should always walk around in a clockwise direction. Similarly, when visiting a monastery or temple, you should approach so that you always walk in a clockwise direction as far as possible. The highest point of the pass will be festooned with coloured prayer flags.

There are innumerable religious holidays (in addition to many national holidays) as well as local festivals specific to particular ethnic groups (the Newars have the most).

Dashain and Tihar (called Diwali in India) are the two most important festivals that occur usually in September-October, fixed by the lunar calendar. Preparations for Dashain tend to start several weeks before, with people shopping and winding down for what can be up to a month of close down. It's very much like Christmas.

#### **Language**

Try and learn some basic Nepali phrases. People really appreciate it. People take greeting seriously and it can be considered impolite to ignore saying ‘namaste’ to everyone. Greet an important person or older person with ‘namaskar’, which is the same as Namaste, but accorded when a higher level of respect is wanted.

English is compulsory at school, but most adults in the countryside probably will be unable to read or write, let alone speak English. Although school children are all taught English, they might find it

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difficult to understand, as their English teachers might not speak the language very well. Children know basic phrases like “what is your name?”, “how are you?” and “where are you from?” Answer their questions and encourage them to practice their English. Many school students are shy and are embarrassed that they don’t have good pronunciation, so encourage them to practice.

Role of the interpreter is to dissolve the language barrier between people. Consecutive style interpreting is when the interpreter translates after the speaker is finished and is the most common. Respect the interpreter’s judgment; if they insist a question is inappropriate, discuss it after the session, but control the conversation and ask the questions you need to obtain the information; you have your job and the interpreter has theirs. Ask interpreter not to “screen” patient’s speech and explain any technical terms to the interpreter.

Learn how to pronounce the patient’s name, say hello, good-bye and thank you

Introduce yourself and the interpreter to the patient and talk through the interpreter not to the interpreter, talk to the patient. Acknowledge the patient with body language, eye contact etc.

Use simple English, avoid jargon, technical terms, and slang. Speak slower rather than louder and be patient, interpretation is not an easy process.

### **Dress**

Dress conservatively: people in the countryside dress very modestly. Even men should avoid shorts as it is not really seen as appropriate, even if you see porters or elderly men showing their knees.

Women should cover their shoulders, avoiding skimpy tops and shorts. Even if you see western clothes and girls dressed in a daring way in Kathmandu, this is copied from the west and would not be considered acceptable in the village.

Washing may be outside and in a relatively public place, so cover modestly. A sarong can be very useful though men can strip to the waist without causing embarrassment. Toilets will almost always be outside, so you will need to dress modestly for bed too, if you have to get up during the night!

### **General tips**

Be forewarned and train yourself to expect shock. Lower your expectations and this leads to less disappointment. Be flexible and use common sense. Get to know the cultural rules and try to speak the language. Read about what to expect about your stay in Nepal—the people, the customs, acceptable behaviour and so on. Acquaint yourself with Does and Don’ts of behaviour in Nepal

Kathmandu is a relatively 'modern' city, where there are lots of tourists and consequently people are not quite so conservative. In the countryside however, this is a completely different world.

The left hand is considered unclean; don’t pick up food and eat with your left hand.

Feet: do not touch others with your feet or point your feet towards someone else. If you walk through a crowded room of sitting Nepalis, shuffle your feet along the floor and lead with your right hand extending in front of you ‘clearing a path’. Avoid pointing your feet at Buddhist or other religious shrines that might be in a room.

Spitting, throat clearing and belching: these are considered normal and not seem as impolite (though breaking wind is considered the height of rudeness).

Nepali men and women of the same sex often hold hands and touch. However, men and women usually do not make any public display of emotion outside Kathmandu, where young people might be copying from outside their normal culture. But people expect a much smaller personal space.

People will be curious and stare. In some places, they may not have seen any or many foreigners before. It can feel that your every move is being watched, by dozens of eyes.

## USEFUL INFORMATION

Queuing: often an alien concept, especially in shops, banks and places where you expect to have to wait to be served. However, a polite cough and reminder that there is a queue will not only earn gratified smiles from other Nepalis (usually too shy to make the comment).

Try not to display anger, lose your temper, and avoid shouting, as this causes embarrassment.

Try to mix with as many villagers as possible, not just the obvious ones like the English teacher.

Copy how the Nepalis behave on things like how and where to wash your clothes and bathe, where to go to the bathroom and so on. Expect to wear the same clothes for a few days.

Time has little meaning in Nepal and is very 'elastic'. There is never much sense of urgency (except on the roads people seem to get very impatient). Westerners measure time by the clock; in Nepal, time is measured by the season – dry or wet! The most punctual Nepalis are those who work with tourists, who are used to the concept of punctuality and are usually reliable in time keeping.

Whist teachers are supposed to keep to a timetable at school, be prepared that this does not mean they will be punctual for class. Government schools invariably close down for at least a month during the Dashain/Tihar period, as though Tihar follows a month later, and often people do not bother to go back to school or work in the intervening week or two. The day after Tihar, school is supposed to start again. However, this is a holiday where 70% of the people in Kathmandu will be visiting family in the villages. The whole country will be on the move. It takes several days before teachers are all back to school and school rarely starts back on time.

Many schools have a main summer holiday to coincide with the local major planting season in the summer. The children usually help their parents in the fields. When school starts back after the summer break, often it takes a week or more before all the children are back in school.

### **Dangers and annoyances**

Nepal has been 'in transition' since 2006, following a decade of Maoist insurgency that ended when the king abdicated. Nepal is a very safe country compared with most, in terms of personal security. Crime exists, but no way on the scale experienced in most developed countries.

However, travel around the country is not without its risks. Nepal has a notorious record for aviation safety (the EU blacklisted Nepali operators in December 2013). There have been eight aviation disasters between 2007 and 2012 and 114 people have been killed. In February 2014, a plane flying to Jumla crashed. A doctor RAN worked with and a volunteer were casualties on this tragic flight. For this reason, RAN does not recommend flying on domestic flights.

You are reminded that when volunteering, you do this at your own risk. However, Nepal is one of the safer countries left in the world, in terms of personal security, especially away from the main towns. However, you need to be careful, as robberies do occasionally occur. Don't leave valuables in a bus unattended. And in Kathmandu, be careful in crowded places as there are a few pickpockets around.

Don't ever trek alone. There have been reports of a number of people who have gone missing or meeting with an accident in the past few years. Even when trekking with others, if you are going to high altitudes, you should take a guide. There are continuous reports of trekkers who have got lost in bad weather and at altitude where altitude sickness poses a real risk, have lost their lives. Just recently bad weather hit very suddenly, causing avalanches that killed a number of trekkers.

Nepal is classified as a low risk malarial country. Malaria was officially eradicated in the 1950s, but there are still occasional occurrences. These are usually from people who have come back from India, where malaria is still a problem in some areas. Generally, mosquitoes do not pose much of a problem except during the summer months. There is however, some risk of dengue fever and more particularly in the Kathmandu Valley, some lesser risk of Japanese Encephalitis where the best cure is prevention, whether by repellent or mosquito nets.

## USEFUL INFORMATION

Bring good insect repellent, as mosquitoes can be found particularly in Manthali, where you might want to consider using a mosquito net. These are easily available in Kathmandu.

Rabies is prevalent but in general, the street dogs are not particularly vicious. Cats tend to be feral and can carry rabies too, as do monkeys. There are poisonous snakes in Nepal but hospitals and healthposts carry serum. It is rare to encounter snakes.

Beware the beggars in Thamel who are more often than not from India. Often carrying a baby, they ask you buy expensive powdered milk which they then sell back to the shopkeeper who is in on the scam. Please don't give anything to the street children that you might encounter in Thamel and Boudha. Giving them money or food only encourages them and goes a long way to undo the work that a number of charities are trying to do to reduce the problem. If you want to help the street children, check out Just One [www.just-one.org](http://www.just-one.org), a very good Irish charity working with the street children in Kathmandu.

### **VOLUNTEERING AT A SCHOOL**

In general, RAN does not actively encourage volunteering other than at the hospitals. Teachers in Nepal are always too happy to give their classes to volunteers and leave them. Even following the school books diligently so the students do not miss the curriculum, the students invariably find it hard to understand foreigners' English and should always have their usual teacher on hand to assist. Given most volunteers' lack of Nepali, it is not possible to contribute much in Nepali medium schools. However, they can provide opportunities for students and teachers to practice speaking English. There can be benefits psychologically, providing encouragement and motivation to the school by having a visitor.

Nepali style of teaching is traditional, rote learning, lecturing and not interactive. Teachers do not get students to work in pairs or groups. Although class sizes are very large making this sometimes difficult, Nepali students are very well-behaved and not difficult to manage. Ideally the volunteer should be teaching the teacher how to better teach, demonstrating more creative ways of teaching English.

Class sizes are often large and government schools are understaffed. At some schools, teachers work as little as possible, spending much of their time in the staff room or just not bothering to go class.

Teachers with a permanent contract have a job for life. The worst that can happen is that an ineffectual teacher might get moved somewhere else. Politics have entered schools. Many teachers belong to one or other political party, to whom they look for protection if required. Temporary contract teachers are not entitled to government training and have no job security. Classrooms tend to be small, crowded, with students on benches with narrow desks. Tin roofs mean rooms are very cold in winter and hot in the summer. When it rains, the noise level can be very high.

English in village Nepali-medium schools is weak, especially in junior classes. Students are shy and not used to hearing English being spoken. Often Nepali English teachers just teach English using Nepali only.

Volunteers need to stay for at least a month. Less than this, there is not much value for the students or the school.

Volunteers should ALWAYS FOLLOW THE COURSE BOOK to avoid the classes falling behind. Classes are examined on the content of the course book at the end of the year.

Class teachers should be AT ALL TIMES in the classroom to assist volunteers with explaining and to observe the volunteer. You must not tolerate a class teacher who does not stay. Let the head teacher know if there are problems. Punctuality is often very poor, but you should not allow this to be the teacher's excuse to leave you alone in the class.

## USEFUL INFORMATION

The main school holiday lasting over at least four weeks falls during Dashain, normally sometime in September – October. Each year the dates change, so if you are thinking of volunteering during the autumn, you should check dates as the school will close a few days before the start of Dashain, ending a few days after the end of Tihar, a second festival that occurs a fortnight after Dashain.

Students are adaptable, but teachers are less so. Don't be afraid to use interactive and new ideas, but students are not usually used to engaging interactively with the teacher, so it can be hard to get them to respond. Try to help break the ice by getting students to engage with each other asking questions. Help by offering students the chance to practice speaking out of class too. Some might be keen for extra English lessons. Practice for teachers too, is very useful.

School starts at 10am and finishes at 4pm with a 'tiffin' break for about 30 minutes during the middle of the day. The school day typically consists of 7 or 8 periods of about 40 minutes. Students stay in their own classroom all the time, with the teacher going to them.

Schools generally have three terms and have end of term exams. At the end of the school year (March), end of year exams determine whether the student can progress to the next class. Students who do not pass this exam will be required to retake the year. The SLC consists of an exam for each subject. If the student fails more than two subjects, they need to retake the whole SLC again the following year; if they fail less than two subjects, they can resit these papers a few months later. Students take their School Leaving Certificate (SLC) at the end of class 10. Passing this enables the student to progress to class 11-12, otherwise referred to as 10+2 or 'Intermediate'.

Cheating is very normal in exams, with many stories of teachers helping students in their SLC exams.

### TREKKING

Volunteers often ask about trekking (the places where RAN works are all under 2000m).

Deusa: The schools at Deusa are in the hills below Lukla and the Everest Region. It takes about 2-3 days to hike to Lukla and then another 7 days or so to trek to Everest Base Camp.

Manthali: Although this is in the hills, it is not only any main tourist route. There are however, some good day hikes in the neighbouring hills. It is only about 4 hours by jeep or bus to Salleri, the district headquarters of Solukhumbu. As well as Everest, there are some very good routes around this area such as the Pikey Peak circuit (a six-day trek around/to a trekking peak of 4,150m), Jumbesi and Dudh Kunde.

If you are interested in trekking, RAN can put you in contact with local guides. (Contact Marianne on [mheredge@gmail.com](mailto:mheredge@gmail.com) if you have any questions).

It is much cheaper to book your trek locally and most of all, this helps local people. It is highly recommended to take at least a porter or guide even if there are two or three of you.

Check your travel insurance if you plan to go trekking, as many exclude trekking over 2,000 metres. (Kathmandu is at 1,330m). Even the shortest easiest treks usually go above 2000m.

### FEEDBACK, SAFEGUARDING ISSUES

Feedback is always welcome (send to Marianne at [mheredge@gmail.com](mailto:mheredge@gmail.com)). In particular, if you have any concerns during your placement about bullying, unwanted personal contact or inappropriate communications from anyone, please contact Marianne as soon as possible, so that she can investigate.

If you are interested in news and information about Nepal and RAN, go and LIKE Rural Assistance Nepal's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Rural-Assistance-Nepal>.