

Responsible volunteering

What is responsible volunteering?

Volunteering in recent years has developed into quite an industry, with organisations sending young gap-year students to work on various projects, often paying quite considerable fees to organizations, that don't always put much of this back into the projects. Some of course do, and offer good value for the support that they provide. Rural Assistance Nepal (RAN) doesn't charge anything, but at the same time doesn't provide anything much more than advice and contacts, so the volunteer has to be fairly self-sufficient.

Sometimes a village community receiving volunteers, especially if they have had the 'wrong' experience of volunteers before, might believe that a white face means that the person is rich, and that they can be 'touched' for whatever help – usually financial – that they can get away with. RAN does not encourage this, and ideally, if a volunteer wants to donate anything to the school or project where they are working, this can be done via RAN.

Volunteers might find that they are left to get on with it, while people watch. RAN insists that when helping at schools, the teacher of the classes volunteers are teaching should also be there, to assist but also to learn from the volunteer.

Volunteers help for various reasons – whether for altruistic reasons or for 'feel good' reasons, but it needs to be done in a way that does not have negative impact on the people receiving help. It is often said, in particular reference to Nepal (but applies generally in the developing world), that aid is sometimes the country's biggest problem.

That said, the positive side of volunteering can be huge. Not only can skills and ideas be transferred, that then can be used after the volunteer has long gone, but the volunteer too, will usually come away a changed person. By being aware and sensitive to local culture, and being prepared to be flexible and open-minded, volunteers can contribute in many very valuable and positive ways, whether they have specific skills or not.

These tips have been collected from experienced volunteers and Nepalis who have experience of working with volunteers. They form a very general guide that will no doubt evolve as more volunteers offer their feedback. It is hoped that some of these notes might help understand a little better what to expect.

Feedback is especially welcome, so please contact Marianne at [marianne@\[rannepal.org\]](mailto:marianne@[rannepal.org]) if you have any comments or suggestions to make.

Arriving in Nepal

- You can get a visa on arrival at Kathmandu airport or land border if coming from India.
- Download and have visa application form filled out to save time at airport arrival. Have ready the exact amount of cash to pay fee.
- Change a small amount of money at the airport bank after getting out of immigration to use for taxi and immediate expenses. Count/check money. You cannot change Nepali rupees outside the country as it is a soft currency and worthless once you leave Nepal. You usually will get a better rate once you reach the city.
- ATM machines work well for most foreign banks (except Royal Bank of Scotland/Maestro). There are several ATMs in Kathmandu, a few in Pokhara but very few anywhere else.
- Try to share taxi to your hotel or stay at hotel with a pick up especially if arriving at night.
- Be very alert and careful in KTM while walking in the city. Never change directions, veer to one side or even think about crossing a street until you turn your head first and check traffic behind you.

Motorcycles, taxis and vehicles will be very close to you and zooming by you. Do not change directions without looking first!

- Try to learn costs of taxi fares, food and items so you don't get misled.
- Frequent tea shops and snack shops that are not touristy. Even within Thamel, if you look in the smaller side streets, you will find many very good places that cost a fraction of the price and serve Nepali food. A block or two out of Thamel and it is a totally different experience.
- Do not drink or even brush teeth with untreated water whether in Kathmandu or out in the hills.
- Treat all water.
- Try and avoid adding to the huge plastic water bottle problem in KTM and the hills by using your own water bottle.
- Wash your hands frequently.
- Do not trust ice, do not eat uncooked vegetables. Do not eat food on display like snacks that do not have a fly screen over it.
- Take local transport in Kathmandu. Its very cheap and not as complicated as it looks!
 - Tempos (little electric vehicles that take 10-12 people) are the easiest;
 - Microbuses always have a passenger who can help you when asking where it goes;
 - Buses – best to know the name of the place you want to go to.
 - Fares are from 12Rs depending how far you go, more than a tenth the price of a taxi.
- Be careful of taxis that accost you. Thamel is worst. Have an idea how much the fare should cost. Be prepared to bargain (they don't like short runs, so will charge a high fixed price). Sometimes '*meter chha?*' works to get the driver to use the meter, but often they will not use the meter and suggest a fixed price.
- Don't expect electricity in Kathmandu or where you will be going. In most places, if there is electricity at all, there are long periods of 'loadshedding' or powercuts. A good headlamp for reading at night is useful. Always know where your flashlight (or 'torch' as it is called in Nepal) is located during the evening and at night while sleeping.
- Gift giving, not required, except maybe something meaningful to your host family at the end of your stay, such as tea or sugar. Get a feel for the needs of the family.
- Try to mix with as many villagers as possible, not just the obvious ones like the English teacher.
- Copy Nepali behaviour as a guide such as how to wash your clothes and bathe, where to go to the bathroom etc. Expect to wear the same clothes for a few days, as you won't be able to wash or change clothes as you are used to in your own country. Don't worry, you'll survive!
- Read the medical chapters in guide books and purchase meds in KTM for most likely problems—giardia and other intestinal problems. Clean cuts right away. Don't pass out medicines to the people, if you're not a Doctor (even though Nepalis will want to treat you as one if you have any medicines). Try to encourage the use of health posts by the locals (see Annex 1 for How to stay healthy).
- You may be coming as volunteer to help Nepalis because they are 'poor and disadvantaged', but treat them as equals and with respect.

TRAVELLING

In most cases, you will be travelling out of Kathmandu to reach the village where you'll be volunteering. This might involve flying, travel by public bus and walking.

By air

- Flights serve many of the hill districts where there are small airstrips. Aircraft generally hold up to about 17 passengers. Some fly daily, but often fly only a few times a week.
- Tickets cannot be reserved from outside of Nepal. To fly to places like Phaplu or Kangil (for Deusa), outward tickets are generally easily available in Kathmandu and return tickets best booked and purchased from the other end.
- Tickets will be quoted in US dollars, but generally payable in Nepali rupees at whatever the given exchange rate is at the time.

- Foreigners pay a higher fare than Nepalis (at least double). Airlines invariably hold seats till the last minute for foreigners, so in general, apart from flights to Lukla at the peak trekking season for Everest treks, obtaining tickets should not be a problem.
- Be prepared for cancellations and delays, as mountain weather is unpredictable and there can be days when the smaller aircraft can neither take off nor land in the smaller airstrips or even Kathmandu.
- There is no longer an extra airport tax on international flight tickets, but there is for domestic flights, payable at the airport before check-in.
- Check-in for domestic flights usually opens at least an hour before the flight time.
- Luggage allowance is a maximum of 20Kg **including handluggage** and excess is charged per kilo (approximately 50Rs per kilo).
- When returning to Kathmandu on a domestic flight, luggage is transported behind you bus and collected 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.
- Taxis at the airport tend to try to charge as much as they can, sometime suggesting prices more than double the real cost. Try to check beforehand what the normal rate is and negotiate on the basis of this. Otherwise a five minute walk from the domestic terminal brings you to the main ring road where there is public transport if you know where you're going, or taxis less likely to be quite so aggressive in their bargaining.

By road

- There are two main bus stations for travelling east and west. Use the Old Bus Park, close to the centre of Kathmandu/Ratna Park for buses heading east; and the New Bus Park on the Ring Road, to the north of the city for buses heading west to Pokhara, Chitwan, and the far west.
- Buses also pick-up/drop off at Kalanki (for routes west), which is on the Ring Road at the junction of the main road that goes out of Kathmandu.
- There are general three types of bus: minibuses, tourist buses and local buses.
- Local buses: some are 'express' or 'super express' buses that are theoretically more direct and don't stop to pick up passengers along the way.
- Minibuses are slightly more expensive, but are more comfortable than local buses. The driving is potluck, and some say that the driving is more dangerous in minibuses. In my experience is it pure luck and I have had as many good/bad drivers on both types of bus.
- Tourist buses run to Pokhara with the Greenline bus including lunch, being the most expensive (currently 18USD one way to Pokhara or Chitwan). Other much cheaper tourist buses are arguably not much different, but don't include lunch and they stop at less expensive but reasonable restaurants along the way (about 500Rs one way).
- Heading east, the 'superfast express' that leaves Kathmandu at 6:30am stops at fewer places and takes 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.
- Allow half an hour to report at the bus station prior to the bus departure time.
- Where possible, you should book your bus ticket a day in advance, though at certain times like prior to major holidays like Dashain, much longer might be needed. If possible it is advisable to avoid travelling at these times as the majority of the country will be on the move for this holiday.
- Bus journeys often involve delays – sometimes a breakdown or road may be blocked (accidents, landslides etc); occasionally there might be a strike that closes the road. Sometimes when there is a road accident involving casualties, the road may be closed until the matter has been resolved. This can be a nuisance and cause delay, but other than the inconvenience, should not cause too much problem.
- Nepalis are often poor travellers and may be travelsick. Buses usually come prepared with plastic sick bags. The roads are very bumpy and winding, so be prepared if you are prone to travel sickness.
- Toilet stops tend to be few and far between, often involving a stop by the roadside. There will usually be at least one stop at a restaurant for food, where there is usually a toilet available.
- Lunch stops tend to be around 10-11am (give or take) and unless you are on a tourist bus, will invariably be at a local-style restaurant, serving dal bhat and maybe little else.

- Along the way, sometimes when stopping in a town, vendors selling snacks will come to the bus to sell slices of cucumbers, bags of fruit that are in season and other food. Whilst the cucumber looks tempting, be aware that especially in warm weather, it may be sprinkled with untreated water.
- Try not to get too dehydrated while travelling on long-distance buses. The driver will stop if you need to go to the toilet, even if this means going by the roadside – which most of the time is when people go.

On foot

- Apart from the plains in the Terai in the southern part of Nepal, there is not much flat terrain. Be prepared for walking a lot up and down. A walking pole can be useful for the steep ascents and descents that might be slippery.
- 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. Usually any time given will be based on a super-fit, unladen Nepali man walking fast. Depending how fast you normally walk in hilly terrain, I usually add an extra 50% so Nepali 3 hours, becomes 4 ½ - 5 hours; 5 hours is 7-8 hours and so on. This certainly works for me.
- Trekking is the reason why most people come to Nepal. Routes to the villages usually include some distance along trails. If you have to stay the night, the standard of lodges will be basic, and unless on a trekking route, not aimed at tourists.
- Trekking to Deusa from Jiri is along a trekking route so lodges are comfortable and the menu fairly comprehensive.
- It is advisable to bring along at least a sheet sleeping bag, or better still a sleeping bag. Depending where you go, and the time of year, a sleeping bag is advisable, especially if you are also going trekking.
- Typically bedding in tourist lodges tends to be clean, though in the peak trekking season, might be in short supply as guides and porters would not generally have sleeping bags.
- Maps of Nepal tend not to be accurate. The Jiri - Pikey Peak - Lukla map, though recent, holds many inaccuracies so should not be relied on for the smaller trails and smaller settlements.
- Best times of year for trekking in Nepal are from October to November and February to May, though the winter at lower altitudes is good too. In the places where you are likely to be volunteering, there is not usually snow.
- From April and May, there will be an increasing chance of showers - pre-monsoon weather. Temperatures start to rise and by May, humidity too.
- From June until September, the monsoon generally means rain most days, usually for a few hours, and not often all day. Often there can be short heavy downpours, especially in the afternoon. Sometimes light rain lasts longer. Humidity will be high and though while it rains, this will bring some relief in the temperature, it gets hot and sticky.
- Temperatures can be 40 degrees C or more in the Terai during the monsoon and this is not the best time of year to go there.
- During the monsoon, 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.
- Remember that the trails are in effect roads between villages, so be careful to give way and make room for porters carrying heavy loads.

Culture

Culture: customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial or religious group.

Culture Shock: a sense of confusion and uncertainty sometimes with feelings of anxiety that may affect people exposed to an alien culture. *Preparation for a new culture is the key to reducing the level of cultural shock.*

Culture is dynamic and complex to understand: differences in visible culture (food, music, art, etc.) make the world an exciting place to explore. Cultural differences operate on a deeper, invisible level even on unconscious level (personal space, social courtesies, and non-verbal communication).

How to manage culture shock:

- Be forewarned, be forearmed! Train yourself to expect shock
- Lower your expectations - less disappointment
- Be flexible
- Plain common sense
- Eat well, rest, laugh, etc.

Expect culture shock, but the more informed you are, the better. Be aware of your biases and recognise differences in culture. Get to know the cultural rules and try to speak the language (see Annex 2 for some useful phrases).

Read all you can about what to expect culturally about your stay in Nepal—the people, the customs, acceptable behaviour and what you can expect in Kathmandu and at the village. 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.

You will find good info in 'country' and 'trek guides' about Nepal such as Lonely Planet, Insight Guides, Rough Guide, TrailBlazer etc. Remember you are the guest in their society and homes. Try to acquaint yourself with the Do's and Don'ts of behaviour in Nepali society.

Communicating effectively through an interpreter

In particular, this will be relevant for medical volunteers.

- Role of the interpreter: to dissolve the barrier that language creates between people
- *Consecutive style interpreting* is when the interpreter translates after the speaker is finished and is the most common
- Learn how to pronounce the patient's name, say hello, good-bye and thank you
- Ask interpreter not to "screen" patient's speech
- Explain any technical terms to the interpreter
- Introduce yourself and the interpreter to the patient
- 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, slang
- Speak slower rather than louder
- Be patient, interpretation is not an easy process
- Respect the interpreter's judgment; if they insist a question is inappropriate, discuss it after the session
- Control the conversation and ask the questions you need to obtain the information; you have your job and the interpreter has theirs

Behaviour

- There is a big difference between your right and left hand. Your left hand is considered unclean; you should never pick up food and eat with your left hand even if you are left handed.
- Note the rules associated with your 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 like a knife blade 'clearing a path'. Nepalis will move out of the way. Better still, try to walk behind them.
- Avoid pointing your feet at Buddhist or other religious shrines that might be in a room.
- Be prepared to be open-minded about the human noises of 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 girls (usually with friends of the same sex) often hold hands and touch – though this doesn't have the same connotations as in many developed countries. However, men and women usually do not make any public display of emotion – other than maybe in Kathmandu, where young people are copying from outside their normal culture.
- People expect a much smaller personal space. The distance between people that is acceptable tends to be much less than in western societies.
- People will be curious and stare. In some places, they may not have seen any or many foreigners before. Sometimes it feels that your every move is being watched; sometimes by dozens of eyes which can be very disconcerting, especially when you are hoping for a little privacy.
- Queuing is 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), but usually lead to profuse apologies from the queue-jumper.
- Don't display a lot of wealth---money and things, both for security and to prevent Nepalis from feeling even more disadvantaged.
- Try not to display anger, lose your temper, and avoid shouting, as this causes embarrassment.

Dress

- Dress conservatively. People in the countryside dress very modestly. Even men should avoid shorts in some communities, where 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 at all acceptable in the village (nor really in Kathmandu either).
- When washing – which may be outside and in a relatively public place, women should cover modestly. A sarong can be very useful for this. 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!

Language

- Try and learn and use some basic Nepali phrases. The people will really appreciate it and you will be more independent.
- In particular, people take greeting seriously and it might be considered impolite to ignore saying 'namaste' to everyone. You might 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.
- See Annex 2 for some simple phrases.
- English is a compulsory subject at school, but more than half the adults you will meet in the countryside will probably be unable to read or write, let alone speak English (not all will be able to speak Nepali, as many only know their own language).

- Although school children are all taught English, they might find it difficult to understand, as their English teachers might not speak the language very well, or even avoid speaking and just translate into Nepali when teaching English!
- Often children will know a few basic phrases like “what is your name?”, “how are you?”, and “where are you from?” Answer their questions, encourage them to practice their English. However many school students are very shy to speak in English. Often they are embarrassed that they don’t have good pronunciation, so encourage them to practice, as this is what they are missing at school and at home.

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 or priest caste, followed by the Chhetris or 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 groups 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 most of 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 found 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).
- 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 also minority Moslem and Christian groups, with the Moslems living mostly in the west and south of Nepal.
- When walking in the mountains, there will often be mani 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.
- When trekking over a pass, often the highest point of the pass will be festooned with coloured prayer flags.
- There are innumerable religious holidays (in addition to many national holidays). In many places, there are local festivals that are specific to particular ethnic groups (the Newars have the most). This means that most weeks there will be a day of holiday.
- Dashain and Tihar are the two most important festivals that occur usually in September-October, fixed by the lunar calendar.
- Preparations for Dashain tend to start well in advance, several weeks before, when people will be busy shopping and winding down for what can be up to a month of almost continual close down. It's very much like Christmas.

Time

- 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).
- The word for 'tomorrow' is bholi; 'now' is ahile; 'fast' or 'quickly' is chito. 'Late' tends to be more common however – dhilo.
- Usually you will find 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 finishes, in theory, school usually starts again. However, since this is a holiday where 70% of the residents of Kathmandu might be away visiting family in the villages, and when the whole country will be on the move – including any teacher who is not from the local vicinity of the school. So often it will take several days before teachers are all back to school if they have had to travel long distances to visit their relatives. So don't expect school to always start back again when its supposed!
- 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.

Dealing with officialdom

- To extend a visa will need a visit to Immigration.
- In theory, volunteering is not allowed on a tourist visa, so avoid stating this as the reason you want to extend your visa. You are a 'tourist'.
- Some of the Immigration staff are creative in finding ways to try to extract more than you need to pay to extend your visa. They offer to speed up the processing, which anyway should be same day, regardless of what you pay. 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, have all your documents ready and don't pay bribes, as this only encourages corruption. If someone suggests you should pay more than what you should, request to see his superior.
- Above all, 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.

Staying in the village

Bathroom/toilet

- Not every home has a toilet (even outside).When they do, in the village, these are nearly without exception outside, sometimes quite a distance away from the house.
- Washing is invariably a 'bucket shower' where you use a jug and bucket of water. If it is very cold, your host might heat up some water to take off the chill – but bear in mind that this uses scarce wood.
- There is usually a water tap outside the house where you can wash. Easier for men, as women need to display utmost modesty. A sarong or loose wrap around that can be worn as you wash is useful as you can be almost guaranteed to have an audience of several pairs of eyes.
- Depending on the size and cleanliness of the toilet, this might offer some privacy.
- Washing clothes can generally be done at the water tap. If possible, bring biodegradable soap for washing with you, as this is almost impossible to obtain in Nepal.
- There is generally little privacy and you will be guaranteed an audience!

Sleeping/bedroom

- Normally, many members of the family will share a room, with little privacy.
- Nepalis often do not seem to undress and change into night clothes always, more or less lying down in much the clothes they have been wearing, especially women who will always be well-covered up.
- Rooms will be simply furnished with a bed and maybe table. Mattresses are invariably very thin, no more than a thin mat, maybe an inch thick. Pillows are often hard.
- You might want to use a blow-up sleeping mattress if you find it difficult to sleep on a thin mattress. In tourist lodges, the mattresses are usually a bit more comfortable, but in 'local lodges, tend to be very thin. (At the lodge by the healthpost in Deusa, the mattresses are thicker, foam ones and not so hard).
- The floor will often be made of compacted mud, sometimes wood.
- People usually get up very early, rising with the sun and going to bed very early, usually immediately after the evening meal, around 8.30-9pm (or even earlier in winter).
- Ear plugs are a good idea, if not for the dogs barking in the night.
- Bedding is usually a duvet with a sheet or sheet cover. Depending on where you stay, this is usually clean, though there are many bugs in Nepal and so be prepared!
- Bedcovers tend to be relatively heavy for warmer times of the year, when a sheet may be enough in many places.
- During the winter months, temperatures will plummet at night in the mountain areas. A warm sleeping bag is very useful to be sure that you are warm enough.
- If you are going trekking too, tourist lodges usually have adequate bedding, though in high season at higher places, this can be in high demand, so it is advisable to take your own sleeping bag.
- In the mountain areas, you will be generally too high for mosquitoes, but below about 1,200m, during the summer months, they will be prevalent. In Kathmandu, mosquitoes start biting from about March to October, and are their worst during the summer months. Although in theory not malarial, overseas health authorities classify Nepal as low risk for malaria (especially in the lowland Terai area).
- In Garimudi, mosquito nets are used during the summer months.
- Terai area (Bardia, Bhalubang/Bangeswal, Chitwan), mosquitoes are prevalent, even with the odd one in winter. Mosquito nets and plenty of repellent should be used.
- In mountain areas like Rawadolu and Deusa, the odd horse-fly might be encountered but there should generally be no mosquitoes.

House

- The Nepali day especially in the countryside starts very early. As soon as it gets light, be prepared for the sounds of throat clearing and spitting!
- Be prepared for noise and little consideration whether anyone might be sleeping, especially after it gets light.
- Be prepared to be the centre of focus for villagers, especially children when you arrive at a village.
- Many people keep a dog as a guard dog (not as a pet), though in the countryside it is generally a lot quieter during the night than in urban areas like Kathmandu, where many street dogs will keep up their barking most of the night. Ear plugs can be very useful.
- The kitchen is often but not always on the ground floor. Cooking is usually performed on an open fire in the middle or to one side of the room. In some places, there may be a mud-built stove and chimney, but more often there is no chimney, with the smoke going out of the window. The room can get very smoky when the fire is lit.
- The outside door will usually be closed at night, often with a bar. It is a good idea to work out in advance of nightfall how to get out of the house if you need to get up during the night.
- Most places have some electricity, whether this is from the national grid, a local hydro power station or run from small solar panels.

- Where there is electricity, if it is supplied from the national grid, there will generally be scheduled (and unscheduled) hours of 'loadshedding' or powercuts. These are less during the monsoon months, but reach a peak in the winter/spring when there's anything up to 16 hours of powercuts a day.
- Where hydro-electricity is supplied, the supply might not be necessarily 24 hours a day, but is usually provided during hours of dark.
- Where solar panels provide light, this will be more limited, with homes often having maybe one or two lights that will be turned on when it gets dark.
- A torch and spare batteries are always very useful, especially when you need to visit the toilet at night, which is invariably some way outside. You may want to bring some spare candles.

Drink

- Water is NEVER safe to drink, regardless if you see local people drinking it and regardless of their assurances that it is pure and clean spring water. Gastric problems are the most common cause of illness in villages.
- Don't use untreated water to brush teeth.
- Try to avoid using plastic bottled mineral water whenever possible, as Nepal has a serious problem with plastic disposal and recycling. It is unlikely that there will be bottled water available in the village where you might be volunteering, but it might be sold at tourist lodges along the way.
- There are several ways to treat water: iodine, water filter, steripen/ionization, and boiling.
 - Iodine tablets - convenient and effective way to treat water; safe to use for periods up to three months. Guardia is the most common problem and be careful, as chlorine is not sufficient to treat against this.
 - If you don't like the taste of iodine, add a neutralizer (usually only available at home), or ascorbic acid. Effervescent vitamin C tablets (available in Kathmandu) are effective, as is powdered 'Tango' fruit drink that is commonly available.
 - Water filters are more bulky and expensive, but effective. Be careful not to get water splashed on the outside of the filter that might contaminate the clean water.
 - Ionizing the water also makes it safe. Use of a Steripen is quick and easy, but be sure to have plenty of spare batteries. If there is an electricity supply, rechargeable batteries are a greener option.
 - Boiled water is safe, but only if it has been allowed to come to the boil. There is sometimes a belief that hot water is just out of a matter of taste, rather than safe to drink. If in doubt, watch that the water really has come to boil.
- Local alcohol commonly drunk in the village is rakshi and chang, usually made from millet, other grains or rice and prepared in different ways, depending on the local community. Rakshi is distilled and is much stronger than chang, but safer to drink in terms of the water used, as chang may have been made from contaminated water, so should be treated with caution.
- Visiting villagers' homes, you may be offered rakshi or chang even early in the morning. This is out of courtesy, but local people often do start drinking from early in the day.
- The day will usually start with a cup of tea and maybe a light snack. Usually people get up when it gets light, so this will be a few hours before they eat 'breakfast' at 9-10am. By this time, much farm work will already have started, like cutting grass for the animals..
- Tea is invariably prepared with sugar in it. If you don't want sugar, then you need to make this very clear, though it will mean that your host will have to make this specially for you. Even if you don't have a sweet tooth, you might find it better to accept sweet tea rather than insist on having tea made separately without sugar.
- Depending on where you go, you may be offered salt tea, which is usually drunk by the family, even if they offer milk tea or black tea to their guests. This is very commonly drunk by the Sherpas and Gurungs, but also the Rais and other groups.
- Beer is normally not so easily available in the village, unless there is a teahouse or guesthouse selling it. However, even the simplest restaurant will tend to sell local rum or whisky. And all will usually be able to serve rakshi or chang.

Food

- Be prepared for spicy food and new and strange food items, try to adapt.
- *Dal bhat* is the staple meal eaten twice a day, usually at about 9-10am and 8pm. This is rice, with vegetable curry (usually) and a dal soup.
- Dhendo is often served as an alternative to rice. Similar to a heavy polenta, this is flour cooked in water and made into a very stiff mash. This is served with vegetable curry, often of a more liquid consistency than served with dal bhat.
- Dhendo is very much regarded as hill food, and also 'poor' people's food, so often your host won't offer it to guests, giving rice instead.
- In the lower hill areas, and especially in the Terai, people prefer rice and would not eat dhendo.
- Pickle or *achar* is usually served with dal bhat and usually is a mixture of garlic, tomato, chilli, ginger, but may take the form of pickled vegetables or fruit. Sometimes this can be quite spicy especially if a lot of chilli has been added!
- Dal bhat will often be served with some raw vegetables – usually cucumber, radish or carrot. This will be peeled, and should not present health problems as long (as 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 consist of biscuits, though often potatoes boiled in their skins may be served with a spicy *achar* or pickle, a bowl of noodle soup, some chow mein etc.
- In the villages, meat is usually reserved for special occasions. In some places it's more common during the spring, when there is less variety of vegetables available. Usually this will be chicken, pork or maybe mutton (usually goat).
- Be careful of pork, which carries many parasites and unless cooked very thoroughly, might cause a problem. In some communities where there are Moslems, pork will be avoided.
- It can be safer to be vegetarian, at least while in the village. This also means that your hosts might not feel obliged to serve meat that otherwise they might not have eaten if they did not have guests.
- Depending on where you are, local food grown will include maize, many varieties of green vegetables, potatoes, rice, a variety of grains that might be used to make roti, mushrooms – invariably found wild in the forest, spinach, ferns and nettles, the latter making a wonderful soup.
- Milk will come from cows and buffalos, the availability depending on whether there is a calf. Buffalo milk is much richer than cow's milk. It is pasteurised 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, but can provide a spoon if you don't want to eat with your hand.
- Before eating, people will wash their hands, often with water provided in a small metal jug. After eating, you will need to wash your hand again.
- Your left hand is your 'dirty' hand, so when eating with your hand, you must eat with your right hand (even if you are normally left-handed)

Volunteering at a school

In general, volunteers don't come for more than a few weeks, and given their lack of knowledge of Nepali, especially in Nepali medium schools will not be able to contribute very much educationally. However they can provide an opportunity for students and teachers to practice speaking English.

However, there are many other very useful benefits. In particular, psychologically, both students and teachers can be much encouraged and motivated by having a visitor to the school.

As long as the teachers observe and stay with the volunteer while in the classroom, they then can have the opportunity to see different ways of teaching and maybe get ideas that they can use later. The Nepali style of teaching is usually very traditional, with rote learning, lecturing and not very interactive. Teachers do not often 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.

What to expect

- Punctuality is often poor and there will often be a lot more coming-and-going in and out of the classrooms than in schools at home.
- Class sizes are often very large; government schools are invariably understaffed; at some schools, teachers work as little as possible, spending up to half the day in the staff room, if not due to free lessons off, then sometimes just not bothering to go class.
- Teachers that have a permanent contract with the government, more or less have a job for life which means that the worst that can happen is that the ineffectual teacher might get moved somewhere else.
- Politics have entered schools, and many of the teachers belong to one or other political party, to whom they look for protection if required.
- Teachers who are on 'temporary' contracts are not entitled to government training, and have no job security, often leading to demotivation.
- Classrooms tend to be small and crowded; students sit on benches and the desks are narrow. Furniture is often in poor repair. Some classrooms do not have desks and students have to manage best they can.
- In Nepali-medium schools, all lessons are taught in Nepali except English; in English medium schools, all subjects as well as English have to be taught in English. This can be a problem for the teachers who are not English teachers, as often their English is not so good.
- Course books are updated every year or so, which means that new books are delivered to the schools or made available every year. Course books are free to students up to class 8 and some stationary is available to primary students. Sometimes there is a problem getting the new books issued in the remote areas.
- School usually starts at 10am and finishes at 4pm in most schools.¹
- There is usually a 'tiffin' break for about 30 minutes during the middle of the day.
- The school day usually consists of 7 or 8 periods of about 40 minutes. Generally students stay in their own classroom all the time, with the teacher going to them.
- Lessons taught usually include Nepali, maths, science, social studies, English, physical; senior classes will also have population, economics, maybe accounts.
- School buildings are often very dilapidated and furniture broken and old.
- Most classrooms have tin roofs, which in winter mean the rooms are very cold; in the summer its hot and when it rains, the noise level can be very high.
- 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'.
- Schools generally have three terms and have end of term exams.
- A lot of cheating is very normal in exams, with many stories of teachers helping students in their SLC 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.

¹ Melamchigaon starts at 8:30am and finishes at 4pm; Rawadolu starts at 9:45am and finishes at 3:30pm; Garimudi teaches classes 11 and 12 from 6am until 10:30am and secondary classes (up to class 10) from 10am to 4pm. Primary classes usually go home earlier than 4pm.

- 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.
- The level of English in village Nepali-medium schools tends to be weak, especially in more junior classes. Students are often very shy and are not used to hearing English being spoken. Often Nepali English teachers teach the English lesson in Nepali.
- Students are very adaptable; the teachers are usually much less so. Don't be afraid to use interactive and novel teaching ideas.

How to help

- It is important to follow the lessons in the course book to ensure minimum disruption to the class that has to finish the curriculum for end of year exams.
- The class teacher should be available AT ALL TIMES in the classroom, to assist with explaining, and to observe the volunteer. Do not put up with the class teacher who takes the opportunity to take the time off and sit in the office. Insist that they are there with you and let the head teacher know if there are problems.
- Students will not usually be used to engaging interactively with the teacher, as much is learnt by rote and invariably the teacher lectures. It may be hard to get an answer from students who are not used to answering questions and who are often shy to speak.
- One way to help break the ice is to get the students to engage with each other – to ask each other questions. This can be done by pair work, but can also work well by pointing at a student to ask a question to another student in the class and then to go around the class in this way.
- You can help by offering students the chance to practice speaking not only in the classroom, but out of class too. Some students might be keen for extra English lessons. Teachers too, may be interested in the chance to practice their conversational English.

Volunteering at a healthpost

Rural healthcare is minimal and often the government nurses are absent and the healthpost is if not closed, run by a peon, who is in effect a handyman.

There are different types of nurses:

- Staff nurse – with more than 2 years training and with experience – rarely found working in healthposts and more likely to be found in the rural hospitals.
- Health Assistant (HA) – 3 years training and is more senior than a CMA or AMN.
- Community Medical Assistant (CMA) – 18 months training which covers medicines and is the qualification for running a pharmacy.
- Assistant Maternity Nurse (AMN) – 18 months training as a midwife.
- Medical Health Worker – 6 months training, usually responsible for immunizations and assisting the CMA or ANM.

There are 65 district hospitals in Nepal, with a few larger 'Zonal' hospitals. There are many hospitals, government-run, NGO and private in Kathmandu, but outside the capital, hospitals are few and far between. Very few doctors want to work in the rural areas. Less than half the qualified doctors in the country work outside Kathmandu, and of those who do, a small fraction work in state hospitals.

Rural healthcare tends to be rudimentary to the point of almost non-existent in some places. A study of the cases recorded at Deusa healthpost over a period of a few months, showed that the most common ailment was 'headache'.

Gastric problems, skin problems, sore eyes, throat and chest infections are very common, with the whole range of ailments from high blood pressure (common), rheumatism and arthritis, aches and infections.

Invariably healthposts are stocked with a limited range and quantity of medicines, supplied by the government, which often in remote areas can be delayed and runs out before the next delivery.

At Deusa healthpost, HexN (UK), a UK charity, supply a good range and quantity of medicines which means that the patients here do not have to only rely on the government supply. In Rawadolu, a small pharmacy in the village means that the village people here have good access to medicines.

How to help

- So medical help to the healthposts is sustainable and long term, most support can be given by working with the Nepali nurses, to help teach and train them and support them.
- When word gets out that there's a medical volunteer, this encourages more patients to come to the healthpost to take advantage of this, though sometimes this may be through curiosity.
- Nurses in the healthpost are in effect expected to do the job of a doctor – which they are not trained or able to do. It is important to refer patients to the nearest hospital whenever in doubt, or when it is obvious nothing can be done by the healthpost.
- Medical volunteers can sometimes help the nurse convince patients of this need.
- Diagnosis is one of the most crucial skills where the nurses are seen to be weak. This is usually due to not asking enough information or the right questions. This is one of the most important areas to concentrate on when helping the nurses, who maybe shy or do not think of what questions to ask.
- Medical books – at Deusa there is a copy of 'Where There Is No Doctor' in English and Nepali, which is a useful reference, developed for use in healthposts all over India. There are also several pharmaceutical reference books.
- Often when a patient needs to be referred, medical volunteers can do a lot to help the nurse by emphasizing the importance of a second opinion at the local hospital (which might have to refer to a hospital in Kathmandu, as they are also limited in what they can offer). It is a sad fact that often villagers will take more notice of a foreigner than they will a Nepali, so at times your support of the nurse can be very valuable.

Accommodation when helping at the healthposts

- At Deusa, there is a small lodge close to the healthpost where a room and food costs about 400-500Rs a day. At Rawadolu, you stay with a family and pay 500Rs a day for your food and accommodation.
- Food will be dal bhat; water is boiled; and you are served tea and snacks as well as two main meals a day (Nepali's eat twice a day, with a light meal/snacks in the late afternoon).

Volunteering at Gulmi District Hospital

Gulmi District Hospital is located in Tamghas, a small town in a hill district in the centre of Nepal, a few hours drive west of Pokhara, not far from the historic town of Tansen, Palpa. On the road to Tamghas, views of the Annapurnas, Macchapucchre and Dhaulagiri can be seen.

It is a government hospital, but receives some support from the US Nick Simon Institute (NSI), a memorial trust that has been set up to help medical care in Nepal. Two doctors work at this hospital, one supported by the NSI. This doctor is qualified to perform surgery – only 14 out of the 65 district hospitals can provide this, so since this has been available, now instead of only 20 or so patients per day, the hospital is seeing 100, 200, even 400 patients a day.

Medical volunteers are welcome to spend time helping at this hospital, where most patients come from the villages around the small district headquarters.

- Government hospital services in Nepal are very poorly resourced, with limited equipment and medicines.
- Patients have to be attended by friends and family, as nursing staff is not adequate to provide care (meals, getting medicines etc).
- Patients have to pay for all of their medical care – registration, tests, medicines, bed, operations etc. Patients' parties bring food and go to the pharmacy (the hospital also has some free government medicines).
- Government doctors generally do not want to work in the districts. Some have to spend a minimum time to payback for sponsorship in their training, but invariably as soon as they can, leave to go to work in Kathmandu.
- Government doctors' salaries are very low, about the same as a secondary school teacher.
- Most doctors, in order to earn more money want to work in Kathmandu where they can have a private practice to supplement their income, or where working in a private or NGO hospital, can earn a better salary.
- Often government doctors are absent, finding reasons not to stay in the districts (study leave, etc.).
- Hours are long: at Gulmi, two doctors cover 24/7 with emergency services available through the night.
- About 60 babies are delivered every month at Gulmi, with ANM (midwives) managing straightforward deliveries; the doctors assist with complicated deliveries and several emergency caesarians are required every week.
- Medical volunteers can help see patients who come to OPD. Nepali nursing students can assist with translating, though the doctors speak very good English.
- Gulmi Hospital provides support to the healthposts and sub-healthposts in the district, so visits are made from time to time to more remote areas to provide specific and general healthcare.
- Qualified, registered doctors would be registered to work in Nepal as a volunteer by the Ministry of Health/Nepal Medical Board by Gulmi District Hospital.
- Medical students who want to do some or all of their medical elective here would be supervised by Dr Kashim Shah, MBBS, MD, the doctor sponsored by NSI.
- Nursing students that want to work as volunteers here would be supervised by the sister-in-charge and would work alongside the nurses and other nursing students in the hospital.
- Accommodation is available in front of the hospital in a small hotel; food at a small restaurant next to this is available. Budget on around 500Rs a day.
- Getting to Tamghas: there are direct daily bus services from Kathmandu taking about 10-11 hours.