

Rural Assistance Nepal (RAN) – September 2010

This summer in the UK (10 weeks) was the longest I've been away from Nepal since I came here five and a half years ago. Starting by teaching English to trekking guides and adults, I now work part-time running an online library on mountains (www.mtnforum.org). In the past year I've been writing reviews on responsible tourism in Nepal (www.traveltocare.com), which is something I'm very keen on promoting here. The dogs are barking as loudly as ever here in Kathmandu, but it's now much more my home than London ever was!

The rest of the time is usually spent on RAN, arranging for volunteers to help at the healthpost and schools (not only the two schools supported by RAN). As well as trekking along well-trodden routes like Langtang, Annapurna Sanctuary, Everest Base Camp and Gorkyo, I've been very fortunate to be able to explore many less well known areas, like Rasawa, Lake Tilicho, Lake Rara, and Pikey Peak in Solukhumbu.

Dev Kumari Rai, the midwife from Deusa healthpost has been in Kathmandu for the past couple of months on a dental training course. Many people in the village are having problems with their teeth, so this was something she felt would be useful to learn more about. Kamala Rai, also a midwife, started at the beginning of June. She is being funded by three medical volunteers who visited Deusa last August 2009. She'll be working with Dev Kumari to run the healthpost, but primarily will work with the community on healthcare training, working with schools and women's groups. She's holding the fort while Dev's in Kathmandu.

While I was in the UK, RSPB gave several pairs of binoculars for Bird Conservation Nepal (BCN) and Friends of Birds, with a few going to the eco-club at a school in Bardia, in the far west of Nepal. This school is pairing up with a school in Bolton that I was able to visit when I was in the UK.

This autumn is seeing a steady stream of volunteers to the healthpost and schools, many going on to trek up to Everest Base Camp and Gokyo.

Deusa healthpost photos: <http://www.facebook.com/album.php?aid=43122&id=548882506&l=240fc65200>

Deusa school: <http://www.facebook.com/album.php?aid=16446&id=548882506&l=294f700dc4>

Garimudi school: <http://www.facebook.com/album.php?aid=16443&id=548882506&l=01b5f191ac>

Rawadolu, Okaldunga

For ages, I've wanted to visit Rawadolu, the village of a long time friend, Rajendra Gurung. A couple of years ago I had helped him edit the proposal for a micro-hydro electricity project for this and the neighbouring village, Bhusinga. Managed by the two villages, by themselves and for themselves, there is now light in every house – about 750 homes. Also on the way to the Everest area, it's not so far as Deusa (4 days) and is only two days' walk from the roadhead at Jiri. It's a beautiful area for trekking. The nearby Pikey Peak (4,125m) offers magnificent views of the Everest Himalayas.



A secondary school was set up by an American in 1992. Now in her 90s, she's effectively now stopped support to the school. Now a government school, it has all the usual problems of understaffing. With just over 500 students, class 6 has 104 students; classes 7-10 average at around 70 to a class. Now there's electricity here, the government is helping the school become an 'Information Centre' where a dozen computers and a teacher are being provided to the school in the next few months.

The healthpost is run by a hardworking young male nurse, who also runs a small pharmacy. This is useful, as it means the village doesn't have to rely on the often inadequate supply from the government.

RAN is looking to send volunteers here (school and healthpost) and also, in partnership with the village, will pay half of the salary of an additional teacher so that the largest class can be split into two.

Rawadolu photos: <http://www.facebook.com/album.php?aid=229839&id=548882506&l=57215426e4>

Volunteering and trekking

If anyone is interested in spending time helping at a school (or any other project), RAN is more than happy to help. In particular, another with basic knowledge of computers can greatly assist with this (especially at Garimudi school, as they have computers but no computer teachers). Many volunteers also try to fit in some trekking, and most continue on from where they have been volunteering, taking local guides and porters that greatly help the local communities where they have been working. Though many people have said that RAN should charge

something for helping to arrange volunteering, I don't feel this is right – if the volunteer wants to make a donation, that's fine, but all I'm doing is providing information. Volunteers just need to be self-sufficient – paying for their food and lodging direct to their hosts and paying guide/porters to get there and if they want to go trekking.

Not everyone has time to volunteer, but anyone interested in just trekking in Nepal, please feel welcome to contact me. I've suggested a couple of ideas below, but can help with idea on anything, as I have a lot of very good contacts with many agents and trekking guides (especially the responsible ones).

Pikey Peak and Raladolu trek

Rajendra Gurung is looking to promote a very special cultural trek that includes trekking to Pikey Peak at the time of an important festival that occurs every three years in Rawadolu. This 10 day trek takes you from Jiri, the old roadhead to the Everest region, to the village where you get a chance to see the village life in this culturally rich community of Chhetris, Sherpas, Gurungs and many other smaller ethnic groups. You then trek up to the Demba Danda ridge and climb Pikey Peak, the high point of the trek at 4,125m.

I've known Rajendra Gurung for just about all the time I've been in Nepal, as one of my first students at a training course where I was teaching English for trekking nearly five years ago. A keen birder, he's a board member of Bird Conservation Nepal (BCN) and when not trekking, is one of Friends of Birds' leaders, helping teach others about birds. He has been largely instrumental in handling a lot of the Kathmandu logistics of arranging financing and transport for the hydro project in his village.



Rajendra splitting bamboo

Departing in May to coincide with the festival, this 16 day trip starts and ends in Kathmandu. Some of the cost of the trek will go to helping pay for the additional teacher that RAN will also be supporting at Rawadolu.

Annapurna Community Lodge trek

Exploring a less well-trodden area in the Annapurnas, you stay in community lodges and family homes in Magar and Gurung villages. This Annapurna Community Eco-lodge project has been set up as a model of public-private partnership to help benefit communities that lie along the trail. The eco-lodges are built from local materials, by the villagers, run by the villages.

Working closely with the village communities involved in the project, Vimal Thapa can arrange treks any time; whether for 6 days or longer. The treks are designed in a way to help the community to be more self-sustaining, create employment opportunities, and to improve children's chances to go to school and pursue higher studies in the area itself. Over 60% of the tour price is paid directly to the community, with the remainder just covering Vimal's costs. He sees his role to encourage treks to this area in a non-profit way, to help the communities involved in the project. This is a very new concept in Nepal, where the local community can hope to directly benefit from tourism, rather than just individuals.

For example, a 13-day trek starting at Galeshwar (a few hours drive from Pokhara), goes through the villages of Nangi, Mohare and Khopra to end at Tatopani, located just below the world's deepest river gorge between Annapurna and Dhaulagiri. A shorter version (6 days) can be arranged, taking you to Mohare Hill, the highest view point at the village of Nangi (2,250m). Trekking in this area provides a wonderful immersion in the local culture, magnificent nature and for anyone interested in volunteering, there is plenty of scope to work in any of the villages, helping at schools or other projects.



Another very good friend, Vimal Thapa is an experienced nature guide. Director of one of the 'greenest' trekking agencies I know, he is passionate and knowledgeable about birds and is Joint Secretary of BCN, most Saturdays leading Friends of Birds birdwatching in the Kathmandu Valley. Dedicated to raising awareness and education for conservation of nature and the environment, he is very keen to find ways to share the positive benefits of income from tourism with village people directly, hence his personal commitment to try to bring trekkers to this area, new to trekking.

Vimal introducing school children to birdwatching.

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