

The background of the entire image is a photograph of the Pashupatinath Temple in Nepal. The temple's white stone structure and its iconic golden Kalasha (sacred pot) on top of the main spire are visible. In the lower foreground, a person is seen from behind, standing with their arms raised in a gesture of joy or devotion. The text is overlaid on this image.

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*"Not all those who wander are
lost" - J.R.R Tolkien*

My month journey into Nepal and
experiencing its diverse culture...

orientation

I was no stranger to the Indian subcontinent. My previous experiences had always left me with a sensation of scorching heat and lush vegetation. My arrival at Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu yielded similar results, as I was hit with a wave of heat and humidity that quickly embraced my whole body – a far cry from the cold bite of Manchester that I had grown up with for the past 17 years!

My main focus of exploring Nepal was to participate in a volunteering scheme that allowed me to assist a remote health outpost somewhere in the region – however, I was required to complete an orientation course in our volunteer organisation guest house located here in Kathmandu. I shyly collected my belongings and headed outside arrivals, where I met a plethora of individuals shouting names and calling business towards taxi services. I thankfully located the volunteer's taxi service and managed to cram my possessions into a small minivan-like vehicle and we began our journey into the residential districts of the bustling city.



Still reeling from a 22 hour layover in Istanbul, my fragile mind was focused on keeling over onto the next soft surface in front of me; I managed to view parts of the city and saw the similar outlook of most developing country cities – a struggling infrastructure, but a resilient & diligent people, who made the most of what they had. It had been quite a time I had seen shanty town buildings and livestock carting on cracked roads – like its brother nation India, Nepal had the atmosphere of grit and steeped in tradition.



Unlike conventional tourists, I had chosen to come to the country during a time considered to be the worst – Monsoon season. Within the autumn months, the country would be subject to downpours that lasted long into the evening. I had no complaint and was thankful that I had prepared beforehand with waterproof clothing. Although the country's agriculture had no quarrels as it relied on this rainfall for rice paddies cultivation.



Over the next few days, I essentially experienced culture shock as I allowed myself to walk around the city and drink in the sights and sounds of the capital. It was quite easy to get lost in the city, and after a misguided 2 hour stroll I became familiar with the streets and landmarks of 'Tamel', the vibrant tourist centred part of Kathmandu. At the aptly named 'Peace Guest House', I quickly made friends with all the other volunteers within orientation batch, who had come from all parts of the world to see Nepal. We boarded, ate and learned Nepali together and truly bonded as a group. It was a hard to break up as a group, as we later found out our posted locations for our projects, however we did make arrangements to keep in touch and even booked a group safari in the coming weeks to see each other again.



dhal bhat

The 6 am wake-up call for our taxi ride to the coaches, ensured a front seat view to Kathmandu at dusk as me and a fellow volunteer Michael readied ourselves for a seven hour journey to Chitwan, one of the lower states in the Tesai region of the country. A hot, wet and sticky 7 hour ride later we peeled ourselves off the plastic coated seats and rolled out into the bustling main street of Bharatpur, the main city within the Chitwan region. As we waited, patiently sitting atop our luggage, we were greeted by a gentleman riding a bright blue motorcycle. He introduced himself as Sanjeev the coordinator of the region for the volunteering organisation, where then he quickly checked we were still in one piece and shuttled us off into another car headed for his village 'Padam Pokhari' – the actual location of our wanted help.

As Nepali pop music blasted out from the radio, our bodies jerked right as the driver swerved to avoid the battery of goats crossing the beaten road. The rural environment quickly ate up the city landscape and we were treated to vast stretches of rice paddies, corn fields and other forms of village agriculture, with no shining city towers in sight – we were within the realm of true village life. We arrived at Sanjeev's and formally greeted by his mother and his younger cousin who both resided at the household. Like many other houses within the village, it radiated character and homeliness but it also included some extra living space and facilities for volunteers i.e. a western style toilet and shower.



We quickly made ourselves at home and acclimatised ourselves to the new setting. Our homestay truly did adopt us into the family, we had suddenly found ourselves calling Sanjeev's mother 'Amma', the local dialect for calling your own mother and everyone else within the village treated us as if we their own siblings – a feature I was no used to seeing within a community. Like clockwork, Amma would feed us three times daily accompanied by a refreshing mid-evening cup of tea. The meals always consisted of the same thing, a healthy serving of rice, doused in several spoonful of rich Dahl Bhat, with a further bonus of steamed or fried vegetables on the side. Dahl Bhat to strangers can be considered to be one of the staple dishes here in

Nepal – a lentil based soup with added spices, it fuelled our day to day activities in Padam Pokhari and I slowly started to ask for seconds.



A previous cycle of volunteers had also been station at Sanjeev's house, allowing us to make even more friends along the way – surprisingly enough I met a retired British volunteer who had not set foot back in the UK for the past 2 years who described to me his backpacking journey across Southeast Asia, teaching and working along the way. A prime example of how people can fall in love with travelling. Alongside our volunteering duties, we spent time as group reading, playing endless card games and relaxing in the local village bar at night. The village was an island away from city life, it was engrossed in natural beauty and the night sky was one of the clearest I have ever seen in my life.

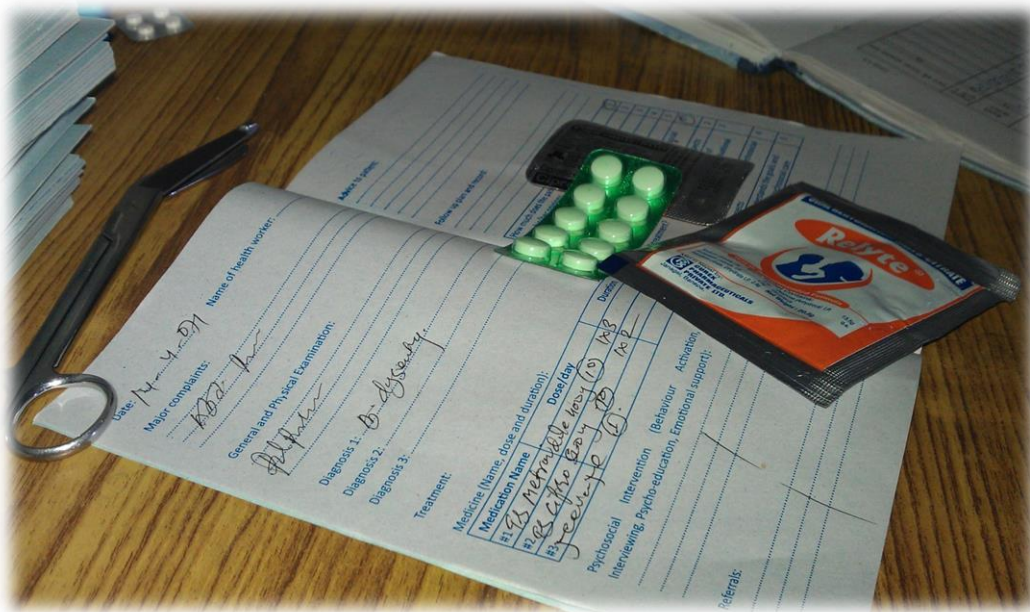


remote health outpost

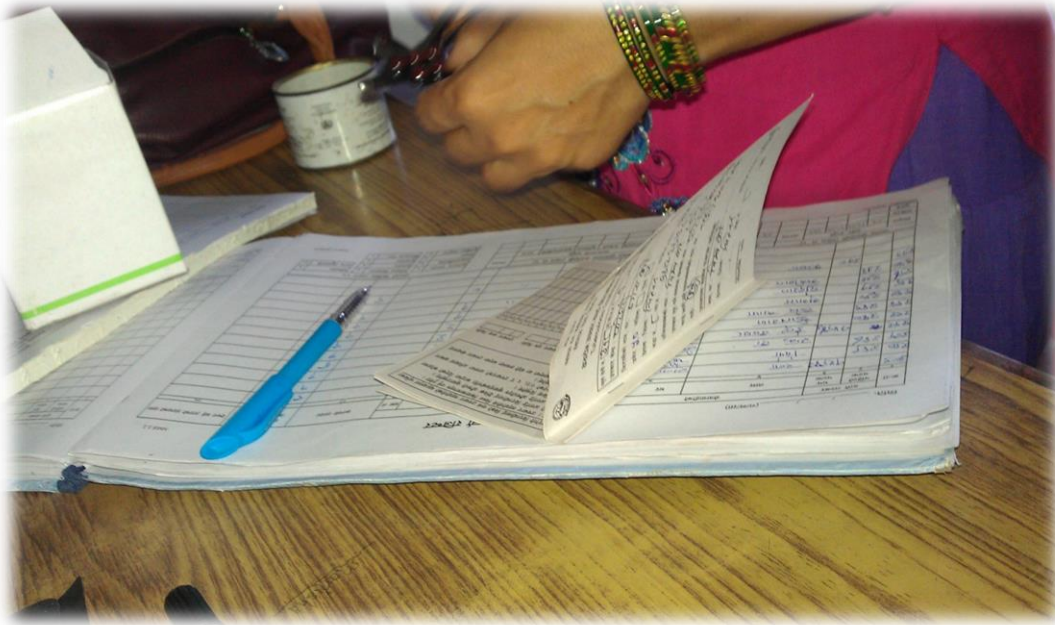
Over an evening sweet cup of tea, Sanjeev quickly described to me the outline of my working day throughout the week. In the mornings, I would help, alongside the other volunteers, to teach the local children their summer work, followed by travelling to my health outpost and volunteering there until the afternoon, where I would return to the household and be ready to cover an evening class with the children again. In total I worked the equivalent of 3 weeks whilst I stayed at Padam Pokhari.

The remote health outpost was part of a local government initiative to provide free healthcare in rural locations to those who desperately needed it. My first steps within the outpost showed me that the building was small composing of one examination room, one nurse's station, a doctor's office, a supply closet and a central hallway. I was introduced to the small number of staff there, which consisted of 2 nurses, one nurse practitioner and only one doctor – an incredibly small fraction of what I would expect to treat the number of people in the local villages.

The main obstacle for me in helping patients was, unsurprisingly, the language barrier – I clearly was not fluent in Nepali or any of the local dialects. This led me to rely on the staff, who themselves had a very limited grasp on fluent English, however ultimately I got the gist, patterns and procedures of what each of them expected of me whilst I volunteered. The doctor was only partially fluent in English; however I did not see much of him, as he was always away on meetings and conferences concerning funding and the WHO malaria initiative (intended to eradicate Malaria from Nepal in the next decade).



I was enrolled in completing many different tasks whilst I was stationed there. Beside the standard duties of measuring blood pressure and check temperature, I was also asked to help sort out medication stocks and help the nurse hand out prescriptions to patients seen by the doctor. This was also the first time that I saw anti-tuberculosis medication being monitored. Lack of funding and a weaker setup meant that all consultations had to be written down meticulously, and I was very impressed by the proficiency that the healthcare staff handled an incredible workload on a daily basis.



One of the final tasks that I progressed onto was cutting and bandaging patients using the basic tools that they provided. I saw how they employed sterilisation using the equivalent of a pressure cooker on gauze and surgical equipment in conjunction with iodine washes to maintain a clean, sterile environment. Under careful observation from the nurses I was allowed to clean and pack open wounds. This was truthfully one of the most practical and rewarding experiences in my young medical education.





The outpost also acted as a training hub for a nearby nursing college, so often I would be able to talk to and work alongside some trainee nurses and reflect on their experiences in the healthcare system in their country. I was fortunate to see on my final day of my work, the maternal and postnatal scheme for tetanus and polio vaccinations. The staff around me were very dedicated and it showed in the appreciation of virtually every patient that left the outpost.

teaching

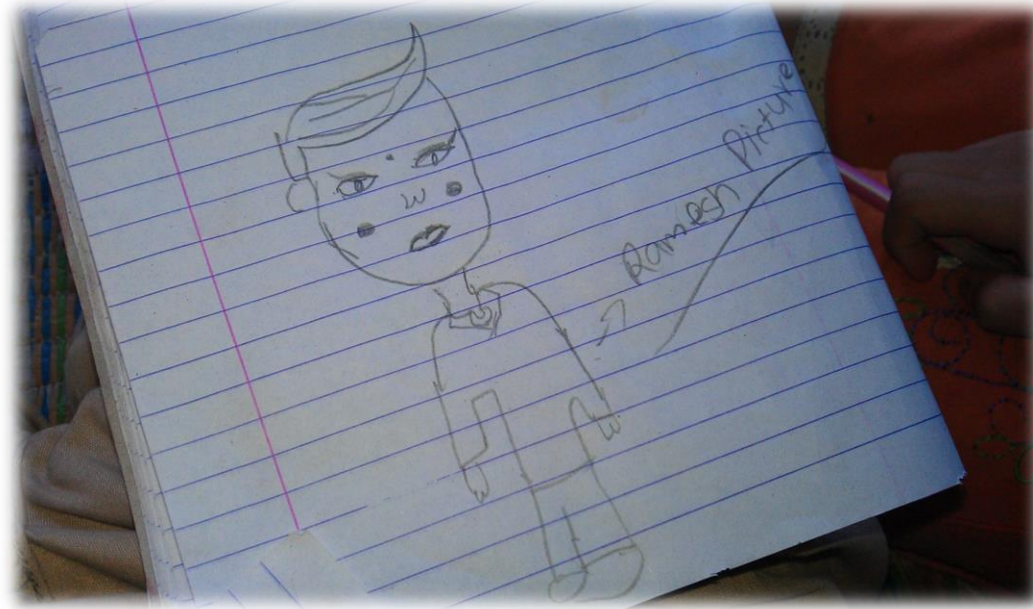
Besides my health outpost work, I was fortunate enough to be given the chance to teach some of the local school children from the homes surrounding Sanjeev's estate. After spending some time with these children – who did not have much but their spirit, culture and imagination – I can say with conviction that they were among the happiest people I have ever met.



The morning would consist of an hour long teaching session in front of the house of one of the locals. The children would bring their books and stationary, where we would perch next to them and set them out tasks (a very lax term for homework!) for them to complete during the day, which we would then check in the evening. Spelling, grammar, science, mathematics, history and even computer science were topics that they had been set by their teachers to complete, over the course of their summer holidays. I was personally surprised to see such a wide range of subjects, which may have been a testament to how long ago I had been a primary school student!



Our evening sessions, were almost always more relaxed as other volunteers had returned from their daily commitments of painting or teaching at another school. We acted as stern teachers to make sure that each child had completed their work and then spent the remainder of the evening playing & singing with the children. They also enjoyed drawing a lot and were desperate to show that they could be the best in everything that I set them.



Every child had a different character about them and it was very entertaining seeing them interact with us and the other children. Teaching them in itself was very rewarding and showed me how vital education was to these children, especially if ever they also wanted to develop and explore the much wider world. In an effort to instil a career towards medicine, I volunteered to listen to their heart and show them how it would sound. The children were ecstatic and lined up rapidly so that they could all have a listen to their own heartbeat and their friends! Somehow I hope I have managed to sprout the idea of a few doctors within their young minds!



निम्नो त्रयदोड

I found myself able to travel in the last few days I was in Nepal due to the health outpost being closed for some time. The other volunteers and I managed to come up with a plan to visit Lumbini – internationally known as the proposed birth place of Siddhartha Gautama in 623 BC – the man who would later be known as the Gautama Buddha. This clearly was one of the opportunities of a lifetime, to be able to see one of the spiritual and religious centres of the world.

We found ourselves at the mercy of the both the intense heat and the monsoon rains at this time of year, but thankfully we spent a nice, quiet evening at the Maya Devi temple near the lake and tree which is purported to be the exact place of birth – where I went and prayed personally. The next day was filled with visiting the ancient ruins of Kapilavastu, the ancient kingdom the Buddha was prince to before choosing the life of an ascetic. That area too was steeped in spiritual practices and culture, however it was sad to see not much remained of previous structures – although surveys were planned to further excavate hidden treasures.



Lumbini was also home to a large area dedicated to monasteries built by different nations of the world i.e. India, Vietnam, Cambodia, France etc. This illustrated the vast international effort that had gone into keeping the area a spiritual and cultural hotspot that could be enjoyed by anyone from any part of the world.



I parted ways with my friends and made my own way to Pokhara, one of the more tourist inclined cities in the middle of Nepal. There I met up with my orientation group and we proceeded to plan several days of activities whilst I was there. Climbing the World Peace Pagoda and Paragliding were among my list of top activities.



Finally my last few days were spent back in Kathmandu to prepare for my departure. I spent the days travelling by myself in local buses to explore the different 'Durbar



Squares' of the three ancient capitals in Kathmandu, relating to different rules at that time period. They were the Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur plazas. I could see the differences in architecture between them, with each of them the centre of power for each respective kingdom, at their height of power.



I, of course, took a visit to the Boudhannath – a cultural icon within the capital city. A sight not to be missed!







This time alone travelling enlightened me to the possibilities of travelling in the future and practising medicine in many different environments and settings. I can definitely see myself in the near future taking part in more outreach programmes whilst practicing (the possibility of a medical elective grows ever nearer!). I cannot thank the Zochonis Special Enterprise Fund enough to make this eye-opening trip possible in the first place. I think I now have a good stepping stone in which I can further my aspirations to becoming a doctor who can work in even the most remote of regions and enjoy life!



Sources of Income:

University of Manchester Zochonis Travel Award - £700
Parental Contribution - £600

Total: **£ 1300**

Expenditure:

Flights - £651
Travel Visa - £26
Anti-malarials - £8
Mosquito Net - £25
Travel Insurance - £25
IVHQ Programme Cost - £350

Miscellaneous Taxi Hire - £20
Safari Ticket Entrance - £55
Coach Tickets between Regions - £35
World Heritage Site Tickets - £15
Food & Drink - £50
Boat hire - £7
Paragliding - £60
Miscellaneous Expenditure (Souvenirs, Toiletries, Clothes) - £35

Total: **£1327**