

Useful information

Volunteering in recent years has developed into an industry. Often paying considerable amounts of money to help, volunteers often end up doing things they didn't expect; can be put into embarrassing situations when are asked for donations; and leave not sure whether they have been much help. Many organizations that provide placements provide a good service and offer value for money for the support they give, but this isn't always the case. Rural Assistance Nepal (RAN) doesn't charge. 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. 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, ask or considering 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.

The following has been collected from experience, volunteers and Nepalese who have worked with volunteers. Feedback is always welcome. (Contact Marianne at marianne@rannepal.org). (Prices are quoted in USD and in 2016 the rate of exchange is approximately 100NRs to one dollar.)

Don't expect much electricity in Kathmandu or anywhere in Nepal. There are typically long periods of 'loadshedding' or powercuts.

VOLUNTEERING EXPENSES

- **Hospital placement charge to medical students:** RAN does not charge anything to volunteers. However, medical students need to expect to give to the hospital the equivalent in rupees of 20USD a week for their placement. The money goes to help Tamekoshi Hospital pay for medicines and healthcamps. (In Kathmandu, medical students usually 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. Buses are very cheap, costing a few pounds for several hours' journey. A shared jeep to go to Deusa costs about 20USD (one way) and a jeep to Manthali costs around 5USD. To make funding that helps pay for the healthcamps that Tamekoshi Hospital is running go further, volunteers are asked to contribute towards the cost of their transport to the villages where the camps are held. This typically comes to about 15USD.

ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD WHILE VOLUNTEERING

Kathmandu: RAN has arranged a discounted rate at the Tibet Guest House (Jack Gurung tibet@mail.com.np), in Thamel that offers free airport pick up and has standard rooms at 15USD/18USD (inc taxes). The Hotel Yambu (Raj Bhatta hotelyambu@gmail.com) at the north side of Thamel also offers discounted rates for about the same price. To get a discount, mention you are volunteering with RAN. Cheaper hotels can be found, but often you pay extra (10% service + 13% VAT) and transport from the airport. In addition, budget on about 7-10USD a day for food while staying in Thamel.

Tamekoshi Cooperative Hospital, Ramechapp – The hospital has accommodation in twin bedded guest rooms (a few rooms may have more beds), with attached bathrooms up behind the hospital. There is a good little canteen for hospital staff that charges about 3USD a day for all meals. If you are out a medical camp or working at a healthpost it is possible that you may stay at family homes. Accommodation is charged at 5USD per night. You need to budget on around 8USD a day for food and lodging.

Madela School, Bardia – Homestay accommodation is available and lodges for tourists. Forest Hideaway Lodge can offer basic accommodation and dal bhat to volunteers who want to stay there at very reasonable discounted rates. Allow about 10-12 USD a day for food and lodging.

Deusa School, Solukhumbu - Accommodation is available near the school at family homes or at basic local lodges not far away. At Ranem, there are no lodges, so volunteers would need to stay with a family. Allow around 5-8USD a day to cover food and accommodation.

Staying in a Nepali home - Not every home has a toilet (even outside). When they do, in the village, these are outside, sometimes quite a distance away from the house. Washing is invariably a 'bucket shower' using a jug and bucket of water. If you are lucky, 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. Women need to display utmost modesty. A sarong or loose wrap around that can be worn as you wash is useful. You can be sure 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! Basic accommodation and food per day in most places should not come to more than 5-6USD a day.

TRANSPORT TO VOLUNTEER LOCATIONS:

Deusa, Solukhumbu

- Shared jeeps go to within an hour's walk of Deusa. Leaving Kathmandu 6am from Chabhil, it takes 12 hours to Salleri or Nele Bazar, and then two hours to Deusa. Friends from Deusa at Namaste Trekking Shop down and opposite Pilgrims Garden Guest House in Thamel can help book tickets (20USD).
- Fly: Phaplu airport is a day's hike from Deusa or Kangil Airport (3-4 hours trek). Flights take 30 minutes, cost 150USD one way and can be reserved in Kathmandu generally a few days in advance.
- Trek from Jiri (4 days). It is a beautiful and not difficult trek, passing through villages and hilly countryside. There are lodges all along the way, as this is the old walk-in to Lukla and the Everest area that takes about 6-7 days from Jiri. You pass through a national park that will charge 20USD.

Manthali, Ramechapp

- Shared jeeps go to Manthali every hour from about 6am until 2pm from Koteshwor jeep stand (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 can call them if you know the time you want to catch it.

Madela, Bardia

- Buses depart from New Bus Station on the Ring Road, leaving every hour from about 2pm until 5pm. They take about 14-16 hours to reach Bardia, passing through the National Park and stopping at Ambassa, where you get off for Bardia, usually in the early hours of the morning.
- Book your bus ticket at any travel agent in Thamel or go to the New Bus Park and book your ticket there (it will be a little cheaper). If you go to book your ticket there by taxi, what you save on the ticket price will be much more than the cost of the taxi.

GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT VOLUNTEERING AT A HOSPITAL OR HEALTHPOST

- Types of nurses: Staff nurse - 2 years+ training, less often found at healthposts but more likely found in rural hospitals; Health Assistants (HA) - 3 years training, senior to CMAs and AMNs; Community Medical Assistant (CMA) - 18 months training; Assistant Maternity Nurse (AMN) – 18 months training in midwifery; Medical Health Worker - 6 months training.
- Nepal has 65 district hospitals in Nepal and a few larger 'Zonal' hospitals. There are many in Kathmandu, but not 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 charge a bit more than the government, but offer better care. They rarely perform deliveries as government hospitals or birthing centres pay them to have their baby there.

- 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.
- Nurses are in effect expected to do the job of a doctor, which they are not trained to do.
- 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' parties 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 spend two years to pay back government scholarships, but leave as soon as they can get work in Kathmandu or abroad. Government doctors' salaries are 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.
- Medical volunteers can help see patients who come to OPD. Nepali nursing students can usually assist with translating, though the doctors speak very good English. Medical students who want to do some or all of their medical elective here would be supervised by a doctor from the hospital.

VOLUNTEERING AT A SCHOOL

- Volunteers need to stay for at least a month, but given most volunteers' lack of Nepali, it is not possible to contribute much in Nepali medium schools. 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- In Nepali-medium schools, all lessons are in Nepali (except English).
- English in village Nepali-medium schools is weak, especially in junior classes. Students are shy and not used to hearing English being spoken. Some Nepali English teachers teach English in Nepali!
- Course books are updated every year and new books are delivered to the schools 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 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.
- Students are adaptable but teachers are less so. Don't be afraid to use interactive and new ideas.
- Students are not used to engaging interactively with the teacher. It can be hard to get students to answer. 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.

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.

Bardia: Though in the hot lowlands, jungle walks into the national park are possible, with the likelihood of catching sight of many animals, if not tigers.

If you are interested in trekking, RAN can put you in contact with local guides. For example, contact Mani Rai from Deusa who can help if you want to go trekking raimani_23@hotmail.com.

- It is much cheaper to book your trek locally and most of all, this helps local people.
- RAN advises very strongly that you take at least a porter or guide even if there are two or three of you. Accidents do occur, especially when going to any altitude.
- Check your travel insurance if you intend to go trekking, as many exclude trekking at over 2,000 metres. (Kathmandu is at 1,330m). Even the shortest easiest treks usually go above 2000m.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Information on arriving in Nepal

- Visa on arrival at Kathmandu airport or land-borders if coming from India.
- There are self-service visa application machines at Tribhuvan Airport on arrival. You just need to bring two passport photos.
- You cannot change money prior to arrival (the Nepalese rupee is a 'soft' currency). You pay for your visa in any main hard currency like US \$, pounds or euros.
- Up to 150 days is allowed to stay in Nepal per year (January - December) on a tourist visa. Extending for less than 15 days, you have to get a 15 day visa (25\$). Every additional day after this costs an additional 2USD per day. 90 days' visa costs 100USD, 30 days 40USD and 25\$ for two weeks (2016).

- If you are staying for two months, this costs would cost 40+25+30 or 32\$ (95 or 97\$ depending if the month has 31 days). It is recommended to get a three month visa as this saves a lot of hassle extending the 30 days one. In theory, volunteering is not allowed on a tourist visa. Avoid stating this as the reason you want to stay in Nepal. You are a 'tourist'.
- If you don't have the exact amount to pay the fee dollars, pounds, or Euros equivalent, you will be given change in Nepali rupees. Indian rupees are NOT accepted (although they are accepted in shops and by taxi drivers in Kathmandu).
- When extending your visa, some immigration staff sometimes seek ways to try to ask more than you need to pay by offering to speed up the processing (which anyway should be same day), 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, 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.
- Do not drink or even brush teeth with untreated water anywhere in Nepal. Treat all water. (At hospitals, boiled or filtered water is generally readily available, but not at schools). Help avoid adding to the big problem of disposal of plastic water bottles by using your own bottle.
- Do not trust ice, uncooked vegetables or food that's on display without a fly screen over it.
- Use public transport in Kathmandu. It's very cheap and easy as long as you know the name of your destination. Fares are from 17 cents depending how far you go. (Tempos are little electric vehicles that take 10-12 people, and there are microbuses and buses with stops are all over the city).
- Taxis are expensive and will usually try and ask about twice what you would pay on a meter. Particularly avoid taxis in Thamel. They charge much more than if you catch one outside. Have an idea how much the fare should cost and be prepared to bargain hard. Try to ask 'meter chha?' and you might be lucky. But only if you know where you're going as you might be taken on a tour. If you want to go sightseeing, it can be worth hiring a taxi for the day.

What to bring:

- A good head-light for reading at night or visiting outside bathrooms is always useful. Powercuts in Kathmandu average on about 12 hours a day, depending on the time of year. Always know where your torch is located during the evening and at night while sleeping.
- Giving gifts is not necessary, but you might want to give a token gift to your host family, such as tea or sugar if you are staying at a family homestay. Do not get anything expensive.
- 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.

Money

- Pounds, dollars and euros as well as any hard currency can easily be changed in Kathmandu at one of the many money changers in Thamel. Banks tend to be very slow and not as competitive.
- The Nepali rupee is a soft currency, so it is not possible to change money before you arrive.
- You cannot change Nepali rupees outside the country. Banks allow you to change up to 15% of the money you changed back into hard currency, but only with receipts to prove what you changed.
- ATM machines work well for most foreign banks (except Royal Bank of Scotland/Maestro).
- Lots of ATMs in Kathmandu and Pokhara but not so many elsewhere. There are two in Manthali.

- Nabil Bank (2016), allows up to 35,000NRs (about 350 USD) to be withdrawn at one time. All the other banks only allow 10,000NRs at a time. In Thamel many have now started to charge.
- Do not bring travellers' cheques as banks and money changers no longer change these.
- Indian rupees are widely accepted in Kathmandu, Pokhara and in Bardia (Terai), but not so easily elsewhere but accepted in denominations of 100 IRs or less. Larger notes are not accepted.
- Hard currency will not be accepted outside Thamel or Lakeside in Pokhara and if accepted, may be at a poor rate. 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.
- 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.
- 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

- Tummy bugs: Many volunteers suffer stomach upsets at some point during their stay. Hygiene isn't a priority. Be careful with where you eat. 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. Chicken, mutton (goat) and pork is usually eaten, with fish being a rarity. It can be a good idea to go veggie, just to be on the safe side.
- Nepali tea is served everywhere and sugar is usually added to the milk and tea, 'cooked' all together. If you don't want it sweet, you usually need to wait longer as it will have to be made specially.
- Be prepared for sometimes quite spicy food and new and strange food items.
- Dhendo is served as an alternative to rice. Like 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 chilli 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.
- Meat is usually reserved for special occasions. It's more common in the spring when there are fewer vegetables available. Usually chicken, pork or maybe mutton (usually goat) is eaten. 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.
- 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).
- **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. Best to drink boiled water (which is easy enough 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 the

bottled water can be suspect. Use a filter or treat water with iodine. When water is said to be filtered, don't trust it, as this won't have removed some of the more serious water-borne nasties.

Travelling and transport

Travelling in Nepal is invariably on buses and very cheap and a five-six hour bus journey won't cost more than about five pounds. Journeys tend to be long and slow and the roads everywhere (except a short stretch near Kathmandu) are in a terrible condition. This is even 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 to sit on the roof of buses and it is not permitted, though outside the cities often drivers allow passengers to go on the roof. There have been cases of people being killed when they have hit electricity lines or other obstructions.

Getting around

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. Be aware, a volunteer with a doctor lost their lives in an air crash flying from Kathmandu to Jumla, a remote area in the north of Nepal. Nepal's air safety record is not very good and personally, I don't recommend it.

- 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 higher fare than Nepalis. 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.
- 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. 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 – bus or shared jeep

- There are two main bus stations: Old Bus Park, near Ratna Park in the city centre for buses east; and New Bus Park on the Ring Road north of the city for buses to Pokhara, Chitwan, and far west.
- Tourist buses to Pokhara (and Chitwan) leave every day at 7am from Kantipath, near to Thamel.
- 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.
 - '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 might be 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 sometimes poor travelers and often 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. There will usually be at least one stop at a restaurant for food where there is a toilet available.
- 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: 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, especially if you are also going trekking. A sheet sleeping bag is recommended. Bedding in tourist lodges tends to be clean, but in the peak trekking season might be in short supply as guides and porters would not generally carry sleeping bags.

Weather: best times to come

- Best times to trek are October-November and February-May. Winter at lower altitudes is good.
- In the places where you are likely to be volunteering, there is not usually any snow.
- April and May, there is an increasing chance of pre-monsoon showers. Temperatures and humidity start to rise by May. June until September, the monsoon means rain most days for a few hours, but not all day. There can be short heavy downpours, especially in the afternoon. Humidity will be high.
- Temperatures can be 40C degrees+ in the Terai during the summer.
- 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 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).
- 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 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. 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.

Preparation

- 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 Do's 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.
- 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.

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!

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 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.

Tips on communicating effectively through an interpreter

In particular, this will be relevant for medical volunteers.

- 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.

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). 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 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.
- 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, a very good Irish charity working with the street children in Kathmandu.