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# ProjectsAbroad



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THE HIMALAYAS

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## Nepal: A volunteer's perspective

Christa Laird – United Kingdom  
Clark Memorial School



For a moment on the way back from school it was if my heart had stopped. For nearly 70 years I had heard tell of the famous Himalayas, the highest mountains in the world. And suddenly, there they were, lifting their giant, shining heads out of the haze as if to challenge the heavens. But not for long. Like all things magical there were only fleeting glimpses, enough to sustain belief in a celestial kingdom in the snow, yet never enough to take for granted.

That has to remain my abiding image of Nepal. But there is a close second, aural in nature rather than visual. It is the sound of a dozen little voices calling out “Christa Me’em, Christa Me’em!” as their owners strained to be first with their answers

to questions about grammar and vocabulary. The Clark Memorial School in Bungamati in Kathmandu Valley, was set up and funded by Japanese philanthropists and caters for the families of poor agricultural labourers and craftsmen, who would struggle to pay even the small fees at a government school. The children (8-13) were so enthusiastic, so keen to learn that it made teaching them English a genuine and memorable pleasure. My own mild hearing difficulties coupled with the children’s unusual accents and soft consonants often made it difficult for me to understand their contributions, but they quickly got used to me and would spell out the words whenever I looked puzzled! The fairy stories which I had brought with me were probably what went down best - old English favourites like *Rapunzel*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *The Elves and the Shoemaker*, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* - each one both a story and a potential mine of examples of grammatical rules. The pictures were a source of huge fascination and on the last day we read and then performed the story of *The Enormous Turnip* - giving rise to rather more laughter than learning! They loved all pictures in fact - above all those of the Queen. I was rather taken aback when in every class they insisted that I look very like Her Majesty. “But she’s 87!” I whined. It was no use. One of the cheekier 13-year olds took to calling me “Elizabeth Me’em” after that!

My walk to and from school never failed to delight and fascinate. Past the little local bus terminus, where every morning dirt-encrusted local buses deposited children from nearby villages; through the square with its few shops where the owners lurked like cave-dwellers in the tiny, dim interiors; then came the goats, the ducks and the chickens, all scratching around in the thick dust - a constant plague, especially when churned up into storm clouds by passing vehicles. My favourite spot in the square was the ‘Bungamati Medical Centre,’ an ambitious name for a dilapidated shack with half the painted letters peeling off, but it seemed to be frequented regularly so must have been effective. Then on past the village pond, dark with sludge and who knows what else, where brightly attired women could often be seen washing their clothes. As the road led up past the little carpet-weaving workshop, from where the women would call out a cheery “Namaste,” it became more rural, radiantly green terraces of wheat opening up on either side, interspersed with patches of golden mustard flowers grown for their oil. Women of all ages would pass and greet me, sometimes bent almost double under elongated baskets laden with wheat or grass or kindling for their fires. And everywhere there were the dogs - who fortunately took little interest in me - and the dirt. Neither can be left out for they were as much part of the landscape as the forested hills, which tower over this part of Kathmandu Valley. For there is no refuse collection and, except for the odd attempt to burn it, plastics included, rubbish is left to lie where it is thrown. Everywhere. It litters the streets of the villages and towns, and the slopes of the hills, sometimes concentrated in dumps but often just scattered. Only the terraces where the crops - principally wheat, potatoes, rice and maize - are rotated several times a year seem to remain pristine.

The week-ends were for exploring. Pokhara was the obvious first destination, and I was curious to experience the 7-hour bus ride, which I had heard described both as the most beautiful my informant had ever taken, and, by someone else, as the “bus ride from hell!” My own assessment falls somewhere between the two - though as we jolted and juddered along an extended length of unmade mountain road (or rather in the process of being re-made, with a remarkable absence of machinery), with some pulse-quickenings drops to one side, it veered distinctly towards the latter. But it was worth all the discomfort the following morning, when, after a 4.30 start, we watched the sun rise, painting the peaks of the Annapurna range a wondrous rosy-gold.

Nepal, with its 36 castes, is a complex land of startling contrasts. The friendliness of the people contrasts with the decidedly unfriendliness of the traffic - “crossing the road in Kathmandu,” to quote one long-term resident, “is an extreme sport!” I had this paradox illustrated for me on two occasions when, with superhuman courage managed to reach the middle of a wide road and then stopped, dithering, as a battalion of motorbikes bore down on me, I found myself being taken literally in hand by complete strangers who guided me safely across! Then there is the contrast between the elaborate Newari artistry in the temples and in some of the older houses, and the often makeshift and unattractive buildings of recent times. Above all, the sublime beauty of its wilderness contrasts with the pollution of the towns and villages, where the lack of infrastructure is most painfully obvious in the state of many of the roads (think gravel pits) and the scale of the refuse.

After three weeks I was ready to come home to husband and family (and to warm showers!), but I shall not easily forget the new friends I made in Nepal or the kindness of so many strangers. And if the eager little faces and voices of the children ever start to fade, they will be brought vividly back by the many touching home-made cards and notes they gave me on my last day at school.

If I had one major disappointment, it came on the day before I left for home, when I had hoped to take the Buddha Air mountain flight to see Everest. After negotiating the muddle of the domestic terminal and locating our flight, we sat in the plane on the tarmac for 30 minutes, only to be told that the flights were all cancelled due to bad weather. Disappointment, certainly, but my thoughts went out to all those mountaineers who have tried to reach the summit of Everest and have had to turn back, whether for injury, sickness or bad weather. And to those who have perished on the mountain. In a curious way, it seemed right that the highest mountain on earth should elude me, a dilettante sight-seer. After all, it presides over that celestial kingdom in the snow which I was privileged enough to glimpse from afar, and shall never see again.

### **Nepal Fact #15**

**Nepal has more than 360 species of orchid! That means that the country is home to about 2 per cent of the world's orchid flowers.**



## Teaching workshop at Clark Memorial School!



Thanks to everyone who came, and we hope you had fun!

# Places We Love: Lumbini

Morgan Hadley – United States of America

The premise is simple: write about your experience at a Nepali location that you love, that stood out to you, that you'll travel back to while daydreaming at your school desk or office cubicle. The place can be your favorite cafe, your host family's home, or even a dusty road in the middle of Nepali nowhere.

The idea is to be able to see how your experiences in a place compared to someone else's, and to gain insight into the #PlacesWeLove you may have not yet explored. I hope many of you decide to share, and they can be emailed to me at [iansandler@projects-abroad.org](mailto:iansandler@projects-abroad.org).

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After spending three weekends traveling around Nepal, the trip that stands out most to me is the weekend I spent in Lumbini. Prior to leaving, I honestly was not that eager to go. I had heard that Lumbini was incredibly hot and full of mosquitoes, two things which I don't particularly enjoy.

But, as this city is recognized as the birthplace of Buddha, I felt like I should probably see it. In Lumbini, the sun seemed very strong, but no hotter than Chitwan and the weekend was almost mosquito free (perhaps we were just lucky though).

We arrived on Saturday and spent the afternoon and

evening strolling through the town and visiting the Maya Devi temple. The contrast between the houses and market of Lumbini with those of Bharatpur (where I am staying with my host family) was significant and something I had not yet seen in Nepal. The area surrounding the Maya Devi temple was also unlike anything I had yet to see in Nepal. The beauty and quiet of the sacred garden is amazing, and something that truly needs to be seen to be appreciated. The temple itself is also quite magnificent.

The next day we rented bicycles to use to see many of the other 42 surrounding temples. The idea of bike riding was exciting to me as it would be a nice change from walking, but I didn't think I would enjoy the temples that much. Again, I was mistaken. The temples were gorgeous inside and out. And while many of them were similar, each had its own style and intricacies. The ornate details and immense size of some of the statues of Buddha are again something I believe that can only

be truly be absorbed first hand. Having hours to explore on our own was also great as we could choose our own pace, which is not possible with a guide.

For me, a trip that began as a "I guess I need to see it while I'm in Nepal" turned out to be an incredibly enjoyable weekend. Not only were the temples amazing, but seeing Lumbini felt like experiencing a different side of Nepal. The smaller town opened my eyes to a slightly different way of life and helped me better understand some of the culture of Nepal.

## Nepal Fact #16

Nepal has a **unique population** of different faiths and religions. The most practiced religion is Hinduism with around **80 per cent of the population being Hindu**.



## *Projects Abroad Nepal Photography Competition*

Congratulations Elias Potier! Elias, 24, from Austria, volunteered at Chitwan Medical Teaching Hospital in Bharatpur, Chitwan, as part of the Medical Project. As a medical volunteer, Elias had the opportunity to observe all facets of a bustling Nepali hospital, from the Emergency Room to the Maternity Ward.

Elias had a few words about his winning shot:



"I was facing strong winds, blowing dust into my face, when I arrived in Pheriche (4240 meters above sea level), located in a valley. It was at the end of day 10 of the Everest basecamp trek, when this little kid welcomed me, playing with the package of a toothpaste tube. Having left the last village about three hours ago, it would've taken me about 4 hours more to reach the next one. Having said that, one can figure how isolated and hard life in the Himalayas is, not to imagine the difficulties a child that young has to face.

But even under the given situation, never have I seen a kid happier over such a simple thing as a toothpaste box, which, in its obscurity, stands for a whole nation's mentality and its values.

'Be happy about the little things you have, instead of being upset about the many things you don't.'

Lesson learned."

