

Youth-Led Development and Cross Cultural Volunteering in Dolakha, Nepal



Living with my host family and other volunteers in Sunkhani, Nepal. I am second from the left at the top with the orange scarf.

Where it all began

My journey to Nepal began on the 12th January 2015 where I spent three months as part of my International Citizen's Service (ICS) Placement with Restless Development. It was in late November that I received the call, offering me a place and I'm not quite sure where the time has gone since but I have made some fantastic memories and friendships which I will cherish always. I'm still adjusting to being home and coming to terms with the cultural differences here but feel that the experience has broadened my understanding of Hindu and Nepali culture and altered some of the assumptions that I had prior to my departure. Before leaving England I fundraised £809 for ICS which enabled my trip and I am unbelievably grateful to GIFT and my other sponsors for supporting me and my work in Nepal.

My assumptions before leaving the U.K

I had little knowledge about Nepali Culture but was very interested to learn more about the country and its Hindu religion. The main thing I knew is that we would be eating 'Daal Bhat' and a lot of it! Curry for breakfast, I thought that's going to be weird! Upon my arrival into Nepal, I was surprised at how much pollution there was in Kathmandu and later to witness how rubbish disposal is also a huge issue even in the rural districts. I had some knowledge about caste systems but had never witnessed how this affects people directly and how lower castes can be discriminated against which is something we had to work around when delivering workshops. I assumed that girls would be quite reserved and dress accordingly so I took only loose clothing with me so that I wouldn't stand out or offend anyone. When we met the national volunteers, we were amused to find them wearing skinny fit jeans and t-shirts whilst we all looked like new age travellers with our low crotch baggy trousers. I hadn't thought about how the city dwellers might act differently to people living in smaller villages and was also really impressed by their level of English. When getting to know the nationals, we found out we all had a lot in common, music taste, hobbies, sense of humour and many shared questions about living in a 'rural placement' as many of them had never travelled so far from home before either.



International and National Restless Volunteers (we have just had kurtas made and are showing them off)

My team

During our 'in country' training the apprehension was building up. Everyone wanted to know who their teams of four were going to be and where their placement was located in relation to Charikot, which is the nearest town. On the second to last day of training, the staff gathered us all up into a circle, just like any other team building exercise and then explained the rules. Each of us had to close our eyes (this is when the intense drumming began) and one by one we were given a piece of paper with a number on and told to leave the circle, next we had to locate the number in the building where we would find the rest of our team and placement name. So off we went (I found this part probably the most stressful time of the whole 3 months) and eventually I found the rest of my group. There was me and Leah from the UK and Santwana and Archana who were our national counterparts. In all honesty, when we first came together I didn't know what to think. I hadn't really got to know any of them very closely and didn't know how to react. I think they felt the same. I was about to go and live with these people for 2 months and I couldn't even remember how to pronounce Santwana's name! We were also given our placement information. Location: Sunkhani, very rural location 2 hours from Charikot. I had a few moments of panic and went outside for a bit of a breather. The night was cool and it felt nice to be away from all the drama for a few moments. I put things into perspective, I'd come here to become more independent, to make new friends, learn about a new culture and challenge myself! The panic soon wore off and went back to the room looking at things in a new positive light.



From left to right: Santwana (national volunteer), Archana (national volunteer), Leah (UK volunteer, Me (UK volunteer)

Arriving in Sunkhani and settling down



The view from the temple near by where we lived



Our House



The toilet where we would also take bucket baths



Mine and Archana's Bedroom

Unfortunately for me, on the day we all travelled to our placements I was feeling unwell with a stomach upset. After a long and bumpy Jeep ride we arrived in Sunkhani and was met with our host mother Nirmala Shiwakoti, who we later addressed as Aama (mother). She guided us to the house and showed us three rooms which we could pick from to be our bedrooms. I was surprised by the amount of rooms, I had imagined a house built of mud to be quite small but there was plenty of room for both the family and us and the other lodgers who we met during our stay. As we had arrived late in the afternoon, the girls decided to go and introduce themselves at Kalinag secondary school where our work was to be based and I stayed in bed feeling sorry for myself. It was a very strange feeling at first, being dropped off in the middle of nowhere, not really knowing anyone and feeling unwell without any home comforts. The electricity was out and things seemed to be going from bad to worse. Finally, I was sick inside my walking boots. And there we had it, I'd hit my low point and the only way from there was up! I immediately started to feel better and even got up later that evening and had my first candle lit Daal Bhatt, I also enjoyed meeting and getting to know the rest of my host family.



Buwa (Host father), Aama (Host mother), Pritti (Host sister) and Me

Our host family appeared to be quite well off in comparison to other people living in the village when you considered the size of their house and the facilities that they had. They owned a couple of luxury items such as a mobile (given to them by a previous volunteer) and a television but other than this, they lived basically and off their own land. I think that most of their income came from having volunteers and other people stay, as they told us they had done a lot of building work in the past couple of years to extend the house and were also building a new mill during our stay. Both Aama and Buwa spent a lot of time harvesting fruit and vegetables from their garden and tending to the animals which included goats, chickens and buffalo. I was pleased to see that they also shared the role of cooking, as I had been told that this is usually a 'woman's job' but they seemed to have divided these household chores equally as well. One thing that shocked me was learning that women were not allowed to use the kitchen when they had their periods and are sometimes made to sleep outside their homes in sheds (goths) when they were menstruating too. To me this sounded ridiculous, the girls tried to explain to me how periods are considered to be unclean but this wasn't a reasonable explanation for me. It sounded to me like a stupid rule that men had made up to have control over women, which I completely objected to, but then another point was made to which I had a better understanding. Women have a lot of duties in the house and when they have their periods they can end up becoming exhausted from all the work. Cooking Daal Bhatt is a long process taking up to 3 hours and therefore, during this time women get to have a rest from the work. I'm still not fully clear on the reason, but the second reason made more sense to me. This also got our group talking more about women's issues and prompted us to tackle some of these issues with students, during our time at the school.



Aama: helping to deliver three healthy kids



Me: Testing my strength

Working in the Community

I found the work to be quite challenging at times for a number of reasons, but really enjoyed working with the different groups and seeing the projects unfold. There were a few issues that I hadn't really considered before the placement, the main one being the language barrier. As I have previously worked on English speaking camps abroad, I automatically presumed that the students level of English would be better than it was. However, when Leah and I tried to lead sessions the students could not understand what we were saying. Even the ones who had a good level of English struggled as they were not used to hearing English spoken in an English accent, which meant we really had to try and simplify and slow down everything we were saying. The language barrier made everything we did a bit difficult, as it was hard to divide roles equally when only half the group could speak Nepali. However we worked around this the best we could and Leah and I ended up planning a lot of the sessions even though we couldn't deliver them ourselves. We also ran warm up games before each session and held extra classes before and after school in English and Creativity.

We felt our Nepali counterparts had slightly more responsibility than us, as they had the duty of speaking to stakeholders and organising meetings which we sat in but couldn't understand. In the first couple of weeks we became a bit disheartened as we were constantly being compared to previous volunteers and weren't clear of what was fully expected of us. The manual that we were working through aimed to improve peoples livelihoods so we led sessions on C.V writing, vocational training, financial management and budgeting. We had been leading these sessions every day in the school but no one had seen what we were doing and suddenly we were being told that we weren't as 'active' as previous volunteers. We decided that we needed to hold more events so that the hard work we were doing didn't go unseen.



Year 9 Class Project: Committee members organising the event

Some of the events and projects that we organised included livelihoods sessions with school pupils and the youth club, a year 9 class project (organised by them), English lessons, creative club sessions, Women's Day Rally and Street Drama, Gender debate, School Cleanup Mission and Handicraft workshops for the mothers group and Youth Club.



Livelihoods Sessions in the School



Debate about gender inequality



Street drama focusing on local issues including alcoholism and gender-roles



International Women's Day street rally



Handicraft sessions – Day 2 Jewellery making

Reflection of my time in Sunkhani



Sitting on the mountain in our free time enjoying the beautiful landscapes

If I could go back now and speak to my former self or other volunteers about to embark on their Nepalese journey I would reassure them that even though it's a long way away and the culture is a lot different to our own, the people you will meet along the way will change your attitudes and you will learn a lot about yourself while you're away too. I feel like I have become much happier and self-aware and because I worked through any problems, my confidence has grown a lot too. Waking up to such a beautiful surrounding is an unforgettable experience and I will really miss everything about my placement and the friendships I made there. Even though the bathroom facilities are frightening at first and washing clothes in a bucket is not such an easy task, it's the small moments that we often take for granted at home made it all so worthwhile.

The Final Farewell



From left to right Archana, Shiwani (team leader), me, Santwana, Suzanne (team leader) and Leah

Written by Rebecca Marsh