

Richard Parkinson - Nepal – Summer 2014

I set off on 16th August from Gatwick airport with my friend Sam. I'd played the organ for a school friend's wedding the day before and I was already feeling shattered from the busy and exciting build up to both the wedding and Nepal. With only a camping rucksack and a small bag to get me through 4 weeks of the unknown, I felt quite apprehensive about the whole trip.



Kathmandu from a nearby hillside

16 hours later I arrived at Kathmandu. The city was hectic and full of loud sounds and smells. We spent a day preparing to set off to our village, meeting the charity team and buying any essentials we had missed. Sam and I also met up with Anushan, the third and final member of our team teaching in Bhotenamlang. The next morning, after not much sleep, we set off at 7am on a 3 hour bus journey to Melamchi, the nearest town to our village. The bus struggled up narrow mountain roads; squeezed past vehicles coming the other way; and regularly lurched worryingly close to the near vertical drop at the edge of the road. Thankful still to be alive, we were met by our host at a café where we had Nepali tea. We had one of our first examples of the difference in attitude to time when our host said he needed to make some arrangements about the trek up to Bhotenamlang and would be back in 5 minutes. It was actually 2 hours later that he returned! The time went quickly, however, as a Lama approached us and told us of his travels through India and Europe. When our host finally returned, we walked the final leg of our journey up to Bhotenamlang village. It took almost 6 hours. We struggled with the heat, the rain and the fact that we were already tired with our lack of sleep from the previous night. Luckily we had porters who carried our heavy rucksacks up for us. One porter was carrying over 40kg all the way! We were very thankful when we finally got to our village – we had dinner, unpacked and headed straight to bed!



The next morning we began to appreciate our surroundings. The three of us were sharing a room in our host Suke's house. Each morning we woke to a spectacular view of the surrounding mountains (if the clouds didn't hide them!). The highest peaks were still covered with snow, while the lower slopes were cultivated terraced paddy fields. The view was so stunning we would often spend a good 10 minutes just taking it all in. Once every two days, I had the joy of having a 'shower'. This involved

pouring a jug of ice cold water over my head and ineffectually trying to get myself clean with shower gel. With this completed, we would usually then head out and walk the 5 minutes up the hill to where breakfast was served!

We ate outside a shop which was run by our host's wife. Breakfast consisted of either noodles, plain rice doughnuts or, if we were lucky, eggy bread. This was all served in large portions with a coffee on the side that had at least double your recommended daily allowance of sugar. Very full, we would head back to our room and sort out final arrangements for teaching plans before heading off to school.



My bed!

Our host family



Each school day started at 10am with 'Morning prayer' a series of physical exercises ending with all the children singing the Nepali national anthem. After this lessons would begin. I taught English to grade 8 (students aged 12 to 15) first. This was always my most dreaded lesson due to the class' short attention span, variable behaviour and inability to understand most of what I was trying to teach them (probably partly my own fault). By the end I got to like them, but it took a lot of effort on my part to work out how to make the lessons effective.

Next I taught grade 10 Maths. Grade 10 were the oldest in the school, aged between 15 and 17. Halfway through the trip, another maths teacher arrived who had been sent by the government which had the knock-on effect than my lessons had to change to half music and half mental maths. This proved an interesting combination, but I think I managed to teach them something about both! After the second lesson of a day, we would collapse in the staff room and zone out for most of our half an hour break, trying desperately to recover and work out what we were going to do next.

My next two lessons would be music. I rotated each week between classes so that they could all get a taste of music. These lessons mainly involved songs and rhythm games designed to improve their singing and musical ear. I often brought my melodica along to the lessons, and had great fun doing actions with the younger ones. Between 1:30pm and 2:15pm we ate lunch back by the shop. Afterwards I would teach another English lesson and a science lesson with the older years using the random assortment of chemicals they found for us in a cupboard.



Sam, Anushan and I ready for a day of teaching

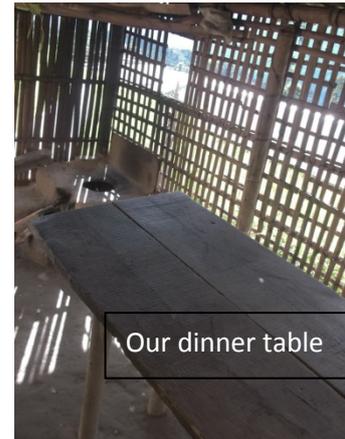


A teacher learning melodica

School finished at 4pm, after which we would either play football with some of the teachers and students; wash our clothes by hand in a bucket of cold water; or have lemon tea at the principal's house. We always looked forward to chatting to the teachers over lemon tea and found it a really good chance to find out a bit more about them and their culture.

Dinner was served at 6pm back outside the shop. It usually consisted of a huge pile of rice with a lentil soup to pour on top of it, some potatoes, green vegetables and egg. I soon got used to this and began to really enjoy it, particularly the occasions on which we were lucky enough to also have chicken or buffalo. We spent the rest of the evening planning, playing cards and reading before bed.

During our time teaching we had to deal with some changes of circumstance. I just describe two situations as examples. The first example was that one day, when I was in the middle of teaching my first lesson, the principal came into the room and announced that the day was actually a school holiday. We stopped teaching and the children and teachers went home again! The second example is that halfway through the second week, four more teachers arrived from the government and suddenly the situation changed from there not being enough teachers to teach the lessons, to there being too many. The new timetable was not very well organised so we'd often head to a lesson to find another teacher already teaching it!



As well as teaching we also got the chance to explore the locality. One weekend we walked to the next valley to meet up with all the other volunteers. We played games, discussed teaching methods



and enjoyed sharing our experiences. It was really good to see some of my friends and to see what life was like in the next valley! Another weekend we went up to visit a temple at the top of the hill. This, as well as the scenery around it, was beautiful. Most amazing was a massive statue of Buddha they had managed to lift up to the top of the mountain, a feat I'm not quite sure how they achieved.

The Budha statue at the top of the mountain

The whole school outside to say farewell on our final day



After three and a half weeks in Bhotenamlang, I had to head back down to Kathmandu. It was a sad moment when I left but luckily one of the teachers, Sunil, had offered to take me back and show me around Kathmandu. This made the journey a lot less stressful. Kathmandu is an amazing city and I got the opportunity to visit some beautiful temples; travel in local vehicles; and visit his parents.

Finally, a month after I had arrived, I set off back home - looking forward to warm showers, English food and seeing friends and family.

My visit to Nepal was an amazing experience. I got to see a little of a breathtakingly beautiful country; I came across some worryingly big spiders; I had my first ride on the back of a motorbike; I haggled for a singing bowl in the markets of Kathmandu; I rang the huge bell in a temple and turned the prayer wheels – both large and small; I played football on the high mountain slopes where an over-enthusiastic kick meant a 10-minute delay to the game while the ball was retrieved from down the mountain. Best of all, I met and made friends with some kind, cheerful and generous Nepalese people. A month of my life which I will never forget and a month which has given me a lifetime of happy memories.