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Placement date and project

Yangrima School – November 1st to December 8th 2011

Note from *people and places*: Julie was our first volunteer to work in Yangrima School – her previous placement had been in another Nepali school. Julie's role in Yangrima involved much observation about the current situation, as well as the school's needs and priorities for future volunteers' input.

The preparation for the project provided by People and Places was excellent.

Kate always replies to emails promptly or is happy to speak on the phone

I researched the links from People and Places on Yangrima and Sermathang

As I was in Nepal for 38 days I took a 90day visa

I knew I was going to be living at 2,600m and that it was a short walk uphill to school

I increased my fitness level by walking at least half an hour every day (something I always intend to do but only usually manage twice a week).

I organised my insurance through a company recommended by People and Places

Everything went as planned.

I travelled with Oman Air seat pitch 32" and 30 kg luggage- can recommend.

Collected at KTM airport on time by Nima and made to feel very welcome

The Hotel Tibet is comfortable. There is a small restaurant that includes a coffee bar and an outside eating area. There is also a roof terrace.

It is clean, the food is basic and good, the staff are helpful

There is Internet for a small charge.

Note from *people and places*: the first name 'Nima' means 'born on a Sunday' – there are 2 Nimas in this report – Nima (K) is Nima Lama, our local partner; Nima (H) is the headmaster of Yangrima

The first evening I was tired so we went to eat near the Hotel

The next morning we visited Swayambunath then Boudhanath Stupa.

After lunch we went to Patan (as I had requested). Nima then hired a rickshaw to take us to old Kathmandu and the vegetable market. In the evening we went for a meal, several courses of Nepalese food accompanied by music and dancing of Nepalese culture a great evening.

During these two days we chatted about the school and I learnt more about its history and plans.

The next morning Nima collected me in the jeep and we travelled to Sermathang. Because of the ruts in the roads and the rain, the 5-hour journey was quite exciting! However we had a good driver and I felt safe.

The village

We arrived at the lodge in the afternoon and I unpacked and settled in

The next day was Saturday (no school) I was introduced to Nima (H) the headmaster and we visited the school buildings. Nima K then left for Kathmandu

In the afternoon I visited a village Stupa festival

The school

On the Sunday Nima H met me and we walked up to school. After introductions to the staff, it was school assembly on the football ground. The surrounding vista on a clear day, of the semicircle of snow-capped mountains must be unrivalled for a school assembly.

During my first week there were several staff members missing. It would seem that many of the teachers have not finished their degrees therefore it is necessary for them to spend days in Kathmandu for exams. The local language is Yolmo, quite different to Nepali. It is impressive that the local children have to learn Nepali, Tibetan and English. In the school there are about 90 pupils almost equal boys and girls. The classrooms are clean and basic. Children buy their own textbooks. They are of a good academic standard and suitable for the course

My work

The plan was for me to be involved with classes 6 & 7 taught by Bahrat Sir. At the start of my first lesson he gave me the chalk but I wanted to observe first. We talked together and I understood we would share the lessons. He is a very nice man, very polite, good at English and explains the facts by repetition, writing on the board and students copying. In the second lesson he left the classroom when I started teaching and did not come to the lessons again.

After two days of this I spoke to Nima to insist that I was not there to teach in place of a teacher but so that we could both learn from each other's teaching methods.

Nothing changed for a couple of days but then Gyalbu returned from his exams. He is young and keen, explaining to me how he found lessons boring when he was at school and wants to make the lessons fun and interesting. He has attended two training days and already tries to make the lessons interesting. We shared the lessons and I observed he already used some interactive methods. Bahrat went to KTM for exams and whilst there broke his leg so did not return to school whilst I was there.

Note: the 'no teacher, no volunteer' rule may seem harsh, but volunteers must work WITH local teachers for effective skills-share to take place. It is vital that volunteers inform either the project principal or our local partners when they find themselves in the position of being expected to take over ... However, there are likely to be occasions when local staff are absent – as here, when they need to travel for exams. There is no provision at Yangrima to employ substitute teachers, as is true of most of the schools we work with. Occasionally volunteers will find themselves in sole charge of a class, but this needs to be discussed and agreed.

On my own I then taught his lessons Class 6&7 science, shared Classes 5&4 with Gyalbu and started teaching Class8, they have an external exam after Christmas so I had not been scheduled to teach them originally. All exams to school leaving certificate (taken in class 10) are set in English and Nepali and answers can be in either. In Yangrima all exams are taken in English medium. All the pupils spoke good English in Classes 6,7 and 8

Classes 3, 4 and 5 were taught in English - occasionally Gyalbu would offer an explanation in Nepali.

Class8- Light: improvising practical lessons with 2 cardboard mirrors from a periscope kit I had taken. We also got the microscopes out; they could do with some new slides (need unicellular animals and also lens tissue as the microscope lenses were quite dirty)

Class 3 shared first 4 lessons with Gyalbu teaching the water cycle, and then took class 5 for English conversation as no teacher for Tibetan.

Class 4 Foods necessary for a healthy diet- used diagrams and presentations by groups to reinforce. Revision of terms work for exams

Class 5 Food, Food chains. Why animals need plants. Revision

Class 6 Light: Sources, Reflection, (mirrors where possible practical part of each lesson). Sound, Magnetism, no magnets so we used the magnetic fastener in my camera case and sourced local magnetic materials

Class 7 Structure of the cell. Different types of cells – used the small microscope I had taken with me and slides already in the library cupboard

Note: without teaching aids and resources, it's important to be able to improvise with whatever is locally available – demonstrating this to local teachers will help develop their own confidence to do likewise.

The last week of teaching, everyone was very cold, staff were lighting small bonfires outside and sitting round them with the class to teach

On my last day the school sat round a bonfire and they had a presentation for me, including Nepali dancing, music, and songs. A great memory was Sonam Sir singing Oh Carol and changing it to Oh Julie to the cheers of the pupils. NimaK thanked me and then had a chance to thank the staff and pupils.

Resources I took:

Given to Gyalbu: Small microscope, Revision guides Physics and Chemistry, GCSE Higher Level.

Periscope kit Key stage 3 revision guide general science

To Library: Books including Gruffalo, Where Going on a Bear Hunt and other books

To Boarding house: Card games- Uno and two word games

Also took stationary, given to Nima

There is always a shortage of whiteboard pens but the boards are suspended from two nails, the reverse is a blackboard so it is easy to change and use chalk.

The school timetable is 4 one-hour lessons Sun to Thursday, and timetable has a 3/2 day split. This meant I had a free lesson most days, I was happy to do English conversation and games in a class without a teacher.

Whilst I was there the teachers were all given planning files, donated by Wellington College. They did not look too happy but NimaH told them to use them - It would be interesting to see if they do.

To a certain extent they plan lessons by reading through in the morning or lunchtimes.

Note: lesson planning is something in which Nepali teachers have no training and no experience – this is an area of modern education where volunteers can most certainly help the local teachers to understand why it will be useful to them and advantageous in the longer term...

Some also mark books

For Nepali teachers, Yangrima's teachers work hard and the children are achieving a good standard.

I found the one-hour lessons a long time for some of the younger pupils.

On Friday mornings there is always a house competition

There are four groups, Culture, Red Cross, Scouts and Eco

Whilst I was there we had a spelling competition, - 50% English, 25% Nepali and 25% Tibetan.

An English essay competition – the essays were of a high standard,

I marked the English essays and found it interesting that one pupil wrote: 'Our headmaster does not like to punish us he expects us to be responsible.'

Yes this is the ethos of the teachers and very refreshing. Note: and unusual in Nepal where corporal punishment is the norm in very many schools.

Scout- it was decided to clean up the school and this included cutting down and removing weeds etc

Culture- Gyalbu decided to do English ballroom dancing. He dressed two students in his suits and did the girls hair. The preparation was as much fun as the demo and needless to say his house won

There were also two sports competition against the local army team, having lost the football we in cricket

All too soon it was time for me to go

Nima K came to collect me and accompanied me on the jeep to Kathmandu

We had a farewell meal in the evening at Rum Doodle Restaurant.

Next day was my extra free day I went shopping and exploring on my own

Then next morning back home

The weather was misty so delayed flight meant a stop in Muscat for an overnight stay

Oman air looked after us well and it was a good end to a great experience

Recommendations for the input of future volunteers

Just be yourself - be patient, flexible and teach by example.

Do not be concerned about going here as a volunteer on your own

It is a very safe area with a small community and a friendly staff.

Being a volunteer on my own meant I bonded with the other teachers quickly. They are so polite they spoke in English and always invited me to have lunch with them and accompanied me down the hill home after school. Sonam miss especially was always looking out for me.

The School is lucky in that their previous link with Wellington College has been rekindled. Therefore they have been given good sports equipment and computers.

There is very little equipment for basic science practical lessons like eg magnets, plane mirrors, curved mirrors and tall pins.

There are no shops locally to buy any of these and unless you are fit enough to walk 4 hours each way to Melamji make sure you take everything you need to Sermathang with you. The daily bus did not run until 3 days before my return, because of the weather.

I did not have to take English conversation lessons - I offered. I had taken one book of 5minute exercises EFL. I think I worked my way through it and wished I had more ideas (English is not my subject) I left the book with Dorje because he was running the evening classes at that time. Dorje and Sonam are siblings.

What was the highlight of your volunteer experience?

I was happy living in the mountains, being part of the school and also the village community. Everyone made me feel as if I was helping even though I was only there for a short time. The friendliness and welcome of everyone.

would you recommend volunteering to other people? If so, why?

Yes it is a great experience to live in another culture by living in a local community at the same time working with pupils keen to learn. You will come away having been given far more than you can give

How did you spend your leisure time?

My itinerary included a trek every weekend. I soon learnt that Helambu flat means up and down the steep hills, ten years ago maybe I would have been trekking every week but I don't have the knees for long steep downhill walks.

One Friday towards the end of my stay I had a day's trek with Nima (H) for a few hours to another lodge for lunch and back, we had one of the sunniest days and I really enjoyed it.

Other Saturdays was happy to spend quiet time reading, preparing and walking in the village on Saturdays. In Yangrima there is a Danish Folk School, teaching English to the women of the village, every evening from 5.30to7.30pm

There was only one Danish girl in Sermathang when I was there, as she was staying in the Lodge asked if I would like to go. I enjoyed it and continued for the rest of my stay. The women had a great sense of humour, keen to learn English and could out sing me in some English songs. After a few weeks knowing the ladies from evening class I spent many happy times invited into local houses to drink tea on Saturdays.

If you are a person who needs to be on the Internet or near shops then maybe it is not for you here. I am happy to spend some time at the weekends reading my book or chatting to locals. Having a busy life at home it was so good to have time in complete peace and reflection.

How was your accommodation?

The accommodation is clean and basic

There is the teahouse with 4 bedrooms upstairs, 2x 4bedded and 2x2bedded.

Downstairs there is a room for the guides and porters. The walls are thin (take earplugs) but trekkers are usually tired so go to bed early.

Mr and Mrs Tshering Lama run the Mountain View Lodge

They were very welcoming and I felt quite at home.

Mr and Mrs Tshering live upstairs in the main house. Downstairs is a storeroom, they have one room where they live and sleep. There is always a stove/ fire lit in the room where all cooking is done . Food is good and basic. Chewang the son lives there in spring and autumn and cooks most of the time the lodge can be busy when full, but they are organised and cope well. No chairs you have to sit on the floor

The parents and Chewang their son could not have been better host family. I enjoyed the food always plenty and varied, there was always a mug of tea waiting by the fire after school. I elected to take a packed lunch to school.

The lack of sun meant I had only 2 hot solar showers, mainly because there was not enough sun. I managed with a bucket of hot water and also wet wipes. Taking my travel hairdryer was a plus because the alternative was sitting in front of the lodge fire to dry hair; it was too cold to dry naturally.

There are 4 rooms in the guest block for trekkers, 2 with 4 beds and 2 with 2.

I chose to be a vegetarian (like the family); all the vegetables are grown by the family and picked each day.

I considered myself fairly well travelled, but I had not prepared myself for the temperature. Most days it was below 7 degrees. In fairness in November the weather is usually warm in the day. As in most of the world unusual climate meant that the sun only shone for about 10 days of the 34 days I spent in Yangrima. Thank goodness I had thermals and a hot water bottle, plus a blanket from the lodge but I was still very cold! I had an anorak but could have done with a padded jacket and a warmer sleeping bag.

Anything else you want us to know

Communication was always good whilst I was there.

Nima H would say Nima K phoned to see if everything is OK.

It always was, he visited once during my stay but I could have always contacted him if I had needed to

Also Chewang and the family had mobiles

I used the Nepali sim provided and the local shop sold top up cards.

In Kathmandu and Pokhara it was possible to text UK (not call) with my UK sim but not in Sermathang

I left wishing I could stay longer. The staff made me feel very welcome. Teaching in the school is a joy; the children speak good English and study hard.

I spent every lunchtime with the 4 younger teachers, watching them pool their food (no I did not join in those chillies were too hot), listening to Gyalbu play his guitar or Dorje record for his weekly radio slot.

I always had someone to walk home with; usually Sonam Sir's music would be playing as we walked. I elected to walk to school most days on my own as there is a very steep section and I liked to take the ascent slowly at that altitude. Very often when walking along you would hear "Hello" from local women cutting leaves for their buffalos and goats.

I hope I contributed to the school half of what the experience gave me. As long as you can live without all western comforts volunteering here will give you the experience of how volunteering should be

There are a couple of shops in the village. Selling, flour, sugar etc also sweets

There is nowhere to buy anything else. There should be a bus every day to Melamchi Bazaar a busy shopping area, however the roads were bad (lots of rain before I arrived there were no buses or jeeps in for a couple of weeks. The bus started again a few days before I left.

In the last week the booked jeeps did not arrive on the booked day, therefore I decided to spend 2 nights in the Kathmandu instead of one (my plane left 9am). (Though I am sure Nima would have got me back for the plane on time somehow.)

Nima (K) was an excellent host it was good to spend time before and after the placement with him to talk about the school. He made sure I was happy with all arrangements and my programme in K added to my overall enjoyment of the placement.

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Thank you.