

# NEPAL

*A journey of discovery and growth*



## **Preface: Introduction**

*"Is this the real life, or is it just fantasy? Caught in a landslide, no escape from reality..."*

As I hummed these lyrics from Bohemian Rhapsody on the plane to Kathmandu, I couldn't help but feel a mix of excitement and nervousness. Ever since I was young, I had dreamed of doing something different, something out of my comfort zone. I wanted to live neither an irrelevant nor an extremely eccentric life but one where, with great insight, growth could be possible, and shared with others in a well-related manner. This very dream carried me to Nepal to join a volunteer group of 16 students from The Chinese University of Hong Kong for a two-week outreach program.

Little did I know, this would be one of my life's most transformative experiences.

## Chapter 1: Arrival in Kathmandu – First Impressions

The plane had barely touched down at Tribhuvan International Airport on December 22, 2024, when a haze and the faint smell of smoke welcomed me into the air. Not exactly the most picturesque welcome, but stepping out of the airport, another thing struck me: intricate carvings and statues of gods and goddesses adorned the walls- peculiar to everything I had ever seen.

Soon, our school bus arrived to take us to Shree Bhagwati Secondary School, where we would be staying. It was very old, rattling over each bump along the uneven road, but its doors were kept wide open for the intruding cool breeze. I sat by the opened door and watched the city pass by: streets lined with small shops, prayer flags fluttering in the wind, and people going about their day with a calm rhythm that seemed foreign to this fast-city dweller.

At the school, I was taken aback by the well-maintained facilities. The principal welcomed us very warmly, and the students were looking from the window curiously with wide eyes. Our sleeping arrangement was, however, not as warm. We were being accommodated in two empty classrooms where we had to lay our sleeping bags on the hard floors of the classrooms. There were no mattresses, no heaters, and no hot water. It was a far cry from home comforts, but I reminded myself: that this was part of the experience I had signed up for.



Figure 1 Arrival Ceremony

### *Teaching and Connecting with Students*

The next morning, we embarked on our first teaching session, a moment I had both eagerly anticipated and nervously prepared for. Standing in front of a group of eager young faces, I felt a rush of emotions—nervous yet excited. Their energy was contagious, and their curiosity seemed to know no bounds, creating an atmosphere that buzzed with potential.

Before diving into teaching, we visited the local town of Sankhu. I was pleasantly surprised by the number of temples lining the streets, each one steeped in history and culture. In Nepal,



it seemed that almost everything could be considered a temple, from small shrines tucked away in corners to grand structures that dominated the landscape. This abundance of sacred sites was a testament to the deep spiritual connection the people have with their surroundings. However, as we explored, I learned about the impact of the 2015 earthquake, which had devastated the town. Many buildings were still in the process of being rebuilt, a reminder of resilience and the strength of the community.

Once we returned to the classroom, the unpredictability of our experience in Nepal became apparent. Unlike Hong Kong where everything was planned weeks if not months ahead, everything felt random in Nepal; we didn't even know we were expected to teach until the very last minute.

In fact, we were called to lead an English class just a few hours before the session began, illustrating the fluidity of our schedule. For the rest of our time there, we discovered we



Figure 2 Local convenience store

would only know which classes we were teaching one day in advance. This required us to plan our teaching content and materials in a very short timeframe.

I was in the group in charge of teaching culture, primarily sharing insights about Chinese New Year traditions and the Hong Kong education system. I aimed to create engaging lessons that would resonate with the students, introducing them to the vibrant customs and practices surrounding the holiday. We explored topics like family gatherings, festive foods, and the significance of various symbols associated with the New Year.

Initially, teaching felt unnatural for most of us, especially when we struggled with the digital gadgets in the classroom. However, as the days progressed, we began to find our rhythm.

One particular student stood out to me—a girl who was shy but had incredible talent in drawing. When I commended her on her skills, her face lit up with joy, and with a hesitant request, she asked if I would like her to draw something for me. Watching her focus intently as she sketched was a reminder of the importance of nurturing talents wherever they appear.

During breaks, the students shared whatever little they had with us, embodying the spirit of generosity that permeated the community. One girl offered me some bread she had saved from her lunch, a simple gesture that spoke volumes about the depth of sharing and friendliness among the Nepali people. “This is mine, take some, eat,” she insisted, and in that moment, I felt a profound connection to their warmth and hospitality.



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As we spent more time with the students, they began to know us better, and we forged bonds that made teaching feel more natural. The initial awkwardness faded, replaced by laughter and spirited interactions. The experience was not just about imparting knowledge; it was about building relationships and creating memories together. Each day brought new challenges and surprises, but through it all, the joy of connecting with these remarkable young minds made every moment worthwhile.

## Chapter 2: Nepali Culture Immersion: A Journey Through Sacred Spaces

Nepal is a land where religion and culture are intricately woven into the fabric of everyday life. This became abundantly clear during my visits to some of the country's most sacred sites, where I witnessed the deep spiritual devotion and rich cultural traditions that define Nepal. Two places, in particular, left an indelible mark on my soul: the **Boudhanath Stupa** and the **Pashupatinath Temple**. These sites are not just architectural marvels but also living embodiments of Nepal's spiritual and cultural heritage.

### *Boudhanath Stupa: A Beacon of Peace and Devotion*



Figure 3 Boudnath Stupa

The **Boudhanath Stupa**, one of the largest stupas in the world, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a cornerstone of Tibetan Buddhism in Nepal. As I approached the stupa, its massive white dome crowned with a golden spire came into view, radiating a sense of tranquility and grandeur. The stupa is adorned with colorful prayer flags that flutter in the wind, carrying mantras and prayers to the heavens. Surrounding the base are countless prayer wheels, each inscribed with sacred texts and mantras.

Walking alongside locals who were surrounding the stupa, I felt a profound sense of connection to something greater than myself. The air was filled with the rhythmic hum of prayer wheels being spun by devotees, their hands moving in a continuous, meditative motion. The sound of monks chanting in the background added to the serene atmosphere, creating a symphony of devotion that seemed to transcend time and space.

I closed my eyes for a moment, allowing the chants and the hum of the prayer wheels to wash over me. It was as if the world had paused, and I was enveloped in a cocoon of peace and spiritual energy. The devotion of the people around me was palpable, and I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of reverence for their faith. The Boudhanath Stupa is not just a place of worship; it is a living testament to the power of collective spirituality and the enduring human quest for meaning and connection.



Figure 4 Photo taken with the group at the Stupa

### ***Pashupatinath Temple: A Reflection on Life and Death***

Another unforgettable experience was my visit to the **Pashupatinath Temple**, one of the most sacred Hindu temples in the world. Dedicated to Lord Shiva, the temple is a sprawling complex located on the banks of the Bagmati River. As I entered the temple grounds, I was struck by the intricate carvings and statues that adorned the buildings, each telling a story of devotion and artistry.

However, it was the cremation ghats by the river that left the most profound impression on me. The Bagmati River is considered holy, and it is believed that cremation here ensures liberation from the cycle of rebirth. As I stood by the river, I witnessed the cremation rites being performed. Smoke rose from the funeral pyres, carrying with it the ashes of the departed. Families mourned their loved ones, their grief palpable in the



Figure 5 Pashupatinath Temple



air. Yet, amidst the sorrow, there was also a sense of acceptance and even celebration.

Nearby, I saw groups of people singing and dancing, honoring the cycle of life and death. The contrast between mourning and celebration was striking, and it left me reflecting on how different cultures perceive death. In Nepal, death is not just an end but a transition, a part of the eternal cycle of life. The rituals at Pashupatinath Temple reminded me that death doesn't always have to be shrouded in grief; it can also be a celebration of a life well-lived and a soul's journey towards liberation.

### A Deeper Understanding of Nepali Culture

My visits to the Boudhanath Stupa and Pashupatinath Temple were more than just sightseeing; they were profound cultural and spiritual experiences. These sacred sites offered me a glimpse into the heart of Nepal, where religion and culture are inseparable. They taught me about the power of faith, the beauty of tradition, and the importance of honoring both life and death.



*Figure 5 Ritual ceremony of Hinduism*

*Figure 6 People praying and dancing in front of the temple.*

The Boudhanath Stupa, with its serene atmosphere and deep spiritual energy, reminded me of the universal human need for peace and connection. The Pashupatinath Temple, with its poignant rituals and reflections on mortality, challenged me to think differently about life's impermanence. Together, these experiences deepened my appreciation for Nepal's rich cultural heritage and left me with a renewed sense of wonder and respect for the diversity of human beliefs and practices.

As I left these sacred spaces, I carried with me not just memories but also a deeper understanding of the values that bind the people of Nepal together. Their devotion, resilience, and acceptance of life's cycles are lessons that will stay with me forever, shaping my perspective on the world and my place within it.

### Chapter 3: Homestay – A Lesson in Hospitality

Homestay in Sankhu was, without a doubt, one of the most memorable experiences of the trip. My partner, Johnas, and I had the privilege of staying with a local family from the Brahmin caste, and from the moment we arrived, we were embraced with warmth and kindness. Their home was simple yet inviting—a three-story structure where each floor served a different purpose: one for renting out, one for their own living space, and the top floor for their small bakery business.

The moment we stepped inside, the mother greeted us with a radiant smile and immediately offered us tea, a gesture that felt both familiar and heartwarming. Nepalese tea, rich with spices and warmth, was the perfect way to settle in. Their son, Raja, a bright and enthusiastic student, took it upon himself to give us a tour of their bakery. Watching him work with such pride and skill was inspiring—he kneaded the dough, shaped each doughnut by hand, and explained the process with an eagerness that was infectious. The aroma of freshly fried doughnuts filled the air, making our mouths water.



*Figure 8 Family Dinner with Local Nepali Students*

That evening, the family invited us to share dinner with them. We sat cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by steaming plates of traditional Nepali dhindo and simple but hearty side dishes. Dhindo, a thick porridge-like dish made from buckwheat or maize flour, was unlike anything I had ever tasted before. Its dense texture and earthy flavor were unfamiliar, but the love and care with which it was prepared made it a meal to remember. The conversation flowed easily, despite the occasional language barrier, and laughter filled the small dining area as we exchanged stories about our lives.

After dinner, Raja pulled out his guitar, and I eagerly asked if I could play a few songs. Strumming the strings, I felt a sense of relaxation settle over me—it was a rare moment of personal comfort in the midst of our adventure. The family listened attentively, nodding along to the rhythm, and even though we came from different worlds, music became our common language.

As the temperature dropped that night, the family surprised us by providing a heater—a rare luxury in Nepali households. It was a small but deeply thoughtful gesture, and after nearly a week of sleeping in a cold classroom with ten others, the warmth and comfort of their home felt almost unreal.

The next morning, as we prepared to leave, the mother performed a small but deeply moving blessing ceremony. She carefully applied tilaka, a red mark made with rice and vermilion, to our foreheads, symbolizing protection and good fortune. Then, with a gentle smile, she draped golden scarves around our necks—symbols of gratitude and well-wishing. I felt a lump rise in my throat. Here was a family that had so little, yet they gave so much to make us feel at home.



*Figure 9 Blessing ceremony from student's mother*

As we stepped out of their home, I turned back for one last glance, taking in the kindness, the generosity, and the lesson in true hospitality. It was humbling, a reminder that wealth isn't measured in possessions but in the richness of the heart.

## **Chapter 4: Everyday Challenges**

One of the most difficult tasks for me during this journey was adjusting to the basic living conditions. Taking cold showers while the temperature outside was below zero was a daily torture, and sleeping on the floor led to muscle aches. Yet, all these "discomforts" trained me to appreciate things that are probably so common to me that I stop noticing: a warm bed, hot running water, and choices of food.

The language barrier was another challenge. Though many locals spoke English, some of the students encountered difficulty participating and engaging actively during the class we conducted in Nepal. Hence, our team consistently devised new teaching methods to cater to the needs of different groups of students to make them feel engaged and rewarded during our lessons.

Our hard work had also been proven to work out in the end when we saw more students willing to speak and answer our questions during the class. As a result, this further led to



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laughter and deeper connections for us to build a better bond with the local students while finding a way to make each other understand our way of communication.



*Figure 10 Group Picture with Students after Class*

## Chapter 5: Memorable Moments

Nepal trip is more than just volunteering and teaching in Shree Bhagawati. There are just so many more moments of this trip that I will always carry with me, including:

### *Christmas in Nepal*

Christmas in Nepal was a unique and memorable experience, especially since it was my first Christmas abroad. Our main celebration took place on Christmas Eve. We used decorations brought from Hong Kong to adorn the vicinity of Shree Bhagawati Secondary School, transforming the space into a festive haven. The atmosphere was filled with joy and anticipation, a stark contrast to the usual hustle and bustle of our daily lives back home.



*Figure 11 Singing and dancing around the fireplace.*

That evening, we were treated to a special meal from the canteen, which included fried chicken and fried rice. This was a rare treat, as chicken was not a common part of our daily meals in Nepal. The simple pleasure of enjoying a familiar dish in an unfamiliar setting made the experience even more special.

As night fell, we gathered around a fireplace with Mr. Sudarshan, the principal, and the vice-principal. The evening was filled with music, dance, and laughter. We started with traditional Nepali songs, learning basic Nepali dance steps from the locals. Later, we switched to popular Chinese and English pop songs, reminiscent of the ones played during Hong Kong University orientation camps. The cold night air was no match for the warmth and camaraderie we felt. It was a heartwarming experience that left a lasting impression on me, a reminder of the joy that comes from shared moments of happiness.

### *New Year's Eve Countdown*

New Year's Eve was another highlight of the trip. We headed to Thamel Street, a bustling area filled with tourists and locals alike. Sourya, our steadfast companion, informed us that

while many Nepalis celebrate their New Year at a different time, Thamel was a popular spot for tourists to ring in the new year.

We had our last dinner of 2024 at a cozy restaurant, where 17 of us, including Sourya, shared our highlights from the year and our resolutions for the upcoming one. The meal was a delightful change from the daily curry we had grown accustomed to, and the conversation was filled with laughter and reflection. It was a moment of gratitude, being surrounded by such amazing people with diverse stories and experiences.

However, the night took a turn when we stepped outside for the countdown. The streets were crowded, and the atmosphere was chaotic. Some individuals were behaving recklessly, throwing trash and stomping on banners. The situation became uncomfortable, and some of our team members reported being harassed by strangers. Despite the unpleasantness, we managed to stay together and ensure everyone's safety. It was a stark reminder of the unpredictability of life and the importance of staying vigilant, even in moments of celebration.

### *The First Yoga*

The yoga class was definitely another memorable event in Kathmandu. I had never really done it before that class, and to be honest, I had no idea what to expect.

The session began gently—deep breaths, slow stretches, and me struggling to touch my toes. The instructor's voice was soothing, guiding us effortlessly through poses while I wobbled through them. Cobra pose? More like "barely lifting myself off the mat." Downward dog? My legs trembled in open rebellion.

Then came the unexpected.



*Figure 12 Yoga Instructors*

The instructor told us to laugh. Not a polite chuckle, but full-blown, exaggerated laughter—"HA HA HA!" At first, I thought it was a joke. But no, they demonstrated, and soon the room filled with forced, ridiculous laughter. It felt strange at first, but then the absurdity took over, and suddenly, I was genuinely laughing—unstoppable, stomach-clutching laughter.



Then I saw them.

A small group of students outside had gathered, watching with amused confusion. My face burned. Oh no, we look insane. Caught between embarrassment and hilarity, I doubled over, laughing even harder.

As we eased into the final relaxation pose, I lay there, breathless, a goofy grin still on my face. I had expected peace and mindfulness from yoga, but instead, I found something even better—pure, unfiltered joy.

And maybe a little secondhand embarrassment. But mostly joy.



*Figure 13 Yoga Class*

### ***The First Hike and Starry Nights in Nepal***

Waking up at 4 a.m. for our hike to Nagarkot was both exhilarating and daunting. The early morning air was crisp and cool, a refreshing reminder that we were about to embark on a memorable journey. Accompanied by some of our eager students, we gathered our gear, excitement buzzing among us as we prepared to witness the beauty of the sunrise over the Himalayas.

As we began our ascent, the path ahead was illuminated only by the soft beams of our headlamps. Each step was a discovery, and I was captivated by the beauty surrounding us. The sky above was no joke; it was an infinite expanse of black, dotted with millions of sparkling stars, each one twinkling like a precious diamond on a vast canvas. It felt as though we were walking through a dream, the kind of scene that stirs the soul and ignites a sense of wonder.

To enhance the magic of the moment, we played Coldplay's "A Sky Full of Stars." The uplifting melody resonated with the beauty around us, creating a soundtrack that made the experience even more unforgettable. We laughed and chatted, our voices mingling with the sounds of nature, as we climbed higher into the darkness.



*Figure 14 Waiting for sunrise with students.*

However, I soon regretted my choice of clothing. In my excitement, I had only worn two layers, and the biting cold quickly seeped through. I found myself shivering, wishing I had bundled up more. Thankfully, a friend noticed and lent me a warm pair of gloves. That small act of kindness allowed me to fully enjoy the experience without distraction.

Finally, as we reached the top of the hill and settled in to wait for the sunrise, anticipation filled the air. The world around us was still, almost reverent, as we watched the horizon begin to glow with the first light of dawn. And then, as the sun broke free from the mountains, the Himalayas emerged in all their glory. The view was so stunning it felt surreal, as if we had stepped into a painting. The peaks, majestic and timeless, seemed to stand guard over the valleys below, their beauty overwhelming in its splendour.

In that moment, surrounded by friends and fellow adventurers who shared my appreciation for Nepal's breath-taking landscapes, I felt an immense wave of gratitude. There is something profoundly special about experiencing such beauty with others who cherish it just as much. It was a reminder that life is richer when shared; nothing compares to the joy of doing what you love alongside those who share your passion.

After soaking in the view and capturing the moment in our hearts and cameras, we began our descent. The walk back to school was filled with laughter and stories, our spirits high from the incredible experience. Once we arrived, we enjoyed a hearty breakfast, sharing our favorite moments from the hike, our faces still glowing from the early morning adventure.



*Figure 15 Sunrise in Nagarkot with volunteers*

### ***First Earthquake Experience***

One afternoon, while napping at the school, I experienced my first earthquake. It was a 4.7 magnitude quake, and while it was a bit scary, everyone remained calm. The experience was a reminder of the unpredictability of nature and the resilience of the Nepali people.

I felt grateful to have been born in Malaysia, where earthquakes are rare, and it deepened my appreciation for the strength and adaptability of those living in seismically active regions.



## Chapter 6: Local People Met in the Journey

### *Sourya Paudel*

Sourya was our steadfast companion throughout the journey, the son of our tour guide, Mr. Sudarshan. A 21-year-old business student at a local university, Sourya was a funny and enthusiastic presence, always ready to hype up the group. He was instrumental in helping us navigate the city, especially during the New Year's Eve countdown.

Sourya shared many insights into Nepali culture, some of which were quite surprising. He explained that while the caste system is less prevalent in modern Nepal, it still influences certain aspects of life, such as university admissions. He also shared that same-sex marriage is legal in Nepal, a fact that surprised many of us, given the country's conservative reputation.



*Figure 16 Me (left) and Sourya Paudel (right)*

Sourya's stories about his family's Brahmin heritage and the challenges they faced in modern Nepal resonated with me. As a Malaysian Chinese, I could relate to the discrimination he described, having experienced similar challenges in Malaysia's education system. His words reminded me that inequality exists everywhere, and it's up to us to work towards a more just and equitable world.

### *Kryzal*

Kryzal, a relative of the principal, was studying computer science at a local university. He accompanied us to the Vajrayogini Temple, where he shared fascinating stories about the temple's history and the fusion of Buddhism and Hinduism in its architecture. Kryzal was a kind and generous presence, often bringing us snacks and food without expecting anything in return.

His willingness to share his knowledge and his genuine interest in our experiences made him a valuable part of our journey. Kryzal's kindness was a reminder of the importance of generosity and the impact it can have on others.



*Figure 17 Picture with Kryzal*

### ***Principal's Son***

The principal's son was another kind soul who went out of his way to help us. When our toilet clogged, he was quick to assist, ensuring that we were comfortable. His willingness to help, even with such mundane tasks, was a testament to the hospitality and kindness of the Nepali people.

## Chapter 7: Other Reflections

### *Conversation with the Domestic Worker in Malaysia*

One of the canteen workers, Lama, had previously worked in Malaysia and Singapore for nearly a decade. He spoke some Malay, which made for fun and nostalgic conversations. Lama and the other canteen staff were incredibly kind, always ensuring we had enough to eat and going out of their way to make us feel welcome.

However, Lama's experiences in Malaysia were not entirely positive. He shared stories of being robbed by police and strangers, painting a picture of Malaysia that was far from the safe and pleasant place I knew. This was a sobering reminder of the challenges faced by foreign workers and the discrimination they often endure.

Lama's stories made me reflect on the importance of treating everyone with respect and dignity, regardless of their background or social status. It was a lesson in empathy and the need to address the inequalities that exist in our societies.

### *Conversation with the Students (Education System in Nepal)*

Talking to the students at Shree Bhagawati Secondary School was an eye-opening experience. Despite their limited resources, the students were eager to learn and had a good command of English. They spent long hours in school, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and were under significant pressure to perform well academically.

Many students shared that they studied hard to make their parents proud, a sentiment familiar to many of us from Asian backgrounds. However, the pressure to achieve high marks, often 90 and above, was intense. Some students even faced punishment if they didn't meet these expectations.

The higher-grade students were more reserved, often unsure about their future plans. Many expressed a desire to study or work abroad, as opportunities in Nepal were limited. Despite



Figure 18 Interacting with students in the classroom.



these challenges, the students were digitally savvy, with access to digital blackboards and the internet, keeping them connected to global trends.

### ***Kumari***

Visiting the Kumari Temple was a unique experience. The Kumari, or Living Goddess, is a young girl chosen as a manifestation of divine female energy. The selection process is rigorous, and once chosen, the Kumari lives a life of reverence and isolation.

Learning about the Kumari's life was both fascinating and thought-provoking. While they receive support and education, their lives are far from ordinary. Some former Kumaris have gone on to attend university and lead relatively normal lives, challenging the belief that marrying a Kumari brings bad luck.

The experience deepened my appreciation for the diversity of cultures and the ways in which different societies honor their traditions. It was a reminder of the importance of respecting and understanding cultural practices, even when they differ from our own.



*Figure 19 Kumari - The Living Goddess of Nepal*

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

As I stepped off the plane back in Hong Kong, the familiar sights and smells of home felt almost surreal. Yet, I knew I had changed. My experience in Nepal had reshaped my perspective on life, gratitude, and what it means to be happy.

This journey was more than just a volunteer trip; it was a journey of discovery and growth. I learned to appreciate the simple privileges of life, the beauty of generosity, and the resilience of the human spirit. I gained a deeper understanding of cultural diversity and the importance of empathy and respect.

Nepal taught me that happiness doesn't come from having more but from being content with what you have. It reminded me to focus on the present and appreciate life's simple joys. This trip may have ended, but it marked the beginning of a lifelong journey of exploration and growth.

I am grateful for the incredible people I met along the way and the lessons they taught me. I hope to carry these experiences with me, always striving to make a positive impact in the world. And I will always be eager to explore the wilderness of this mesmerizing world, always exploring.



*“One of the things I love most about this life is that there's no final goodbye. You know, I've met hundreds of people out here and I don't ever say a final goodbye. I always just say, "I'll see you down the road." And I do. And whether it's a month, or a year, or sometimes years, I see them again.”*

***Nomadland***