

Hector's Year Teaching in Nepal

I would like to thank you for the generous donation that allowed me to spend an incredible 8 months teaching in Nepal.

I lived and taught in a small village called Nisi. Nisi is a long and very bumpy 25-hour bus journey from Kathmandu. The village was quite rural but had quickly and recently opened up since the construction of a new highway that runs through it. There are around 2000-4000 people who live in the area, either in the main village or in one of the numerous other villages that climbed up the steep valley sides.



The school I taught in was large, with around 600 students as family sizes were big, with some children having up to seven siblings. It also had much better facilities than other Nepal volunteer's schools such as; a computer lab with 20 computers and well-equipped science and veterinary labs.

For the duration of my time there, I mostly taught English in the primary school with one period in the school's computer lab with class 6 who were first year age. Towards the end I also taught class 7 English.

The lower primary school classes, 2 and 3, were quite small with about 30 students in each but classes 4 and 5, who were upper primary, were bigger with about 40 to 50 students each. Though these classes were nothing compared to class 7 which had 78 students on the register! At the beginning, each class had a main teacher who was in the room with me while I taught. Being new in the village and to teaching this was comforting as they helped control classes and with what I had planned, often explaining the activity to the students better in Nepali.

My main difficulty was trying to figure out what the syllabus was, as we weren't told directly. They used textbooks that were full of mistakes and pointless activities, which I used loosely as a basic guide for what topics to teach, until I was told that the exams, which determine whether they move into the next class and which all children in Nepal from nursery to their last year at school sit, are based solely on the textbooks. From then on, I followed the textbooks much more closely whilst also adding in some fun activities and skipping the most useless exercises.

As I got more settled, some of the teachers started drifting out of the classroom after I came in. I had previously relied on them to keep classes behaving. When they left, the room got a

bit louder and the students rowdier. The first class I had to teach alone (because the teacher was ill) was class 5, who are the equivalent of Scottish primary seven. It was chaos! I don't think we got any work done. They did do lots of fighting, throwing brushes at each other and standing on their benches. I remember feeling so powerless and inadequate as a teacher. This was luckily a turning point in my year because I had to do something to get them to behave or my year would be horrible. I started writing names of pupils who had been good on the board and giving them stickers at the end and I brought my small, quiet speaker into class and would play a song which we would sing and dance to at the end of the lesson if they were all good – when this got a bit boring I took them to the computer lab at the end of the week to watch the BBC's walking with dinosaurs which I'd downloaded painfully slowly in the cold outside my house with a 3G hotspot as the school didn't have WIFI. They also had a section on dinosaurs in their textbook and were extremely enthusiastic about learning about them. These incentives worked well, and I now didn't have to spend all my time shouting or splitting up fights, though there was still some of it. I felt much happier at school after 'taming' class 5 and started to get on well with them in class.



Another take away from the teaching part of my 8 months was some of the games I played with class 3, who were nine to twelve years old. I really enjoyed this class as most days for the last five or ten minutes we'd play Simon says with lots of actions and some vocabulary. It was really good fun and they definitely got much better at recognising the simple verbs that I was acting out. It also worked well as an incentive, which was taken away if they behaved badly and was competitive, so they were all attentive.

Just before Christmas I asked my parents to send out some Biff and Chip books because most of the children couldn't read well, as they aren't taught the sounds of the letters just the alphabet. I started extra phonics classes before school with class 3 which were rewarding as I could see some of them making real progress. Only a few of them turned up to the classes so it was much less draining and easier to teach them. This is one of the parts of my volunteering where I felt I had a big impact and was really disappointed to leave behind. I left the books and flashcards, so I hope they will be used if there are future volunteers or the Nepali teachers. Coming up to exams I taught class 4 after school which I really enjoyed as there were much less students which made everything easier. It was nice to be able to have a quieter lesson as the shyer kids were more comfortable and I was able to practice speaking with them individually which was impossible in the big and noisy period I taught.

Outside of school, my partner and another teacher who lived with us played football with some older students. There wasn't much flat ground in the village that wasn't farmland, but after a bit of searching, terraforming with hoe's and cutting bamboo for goals we had quite a good pitch. It was quite informal, and we just played games because we only had one ball, but we had plans to buy more and some cones too for training. Volleyball is Nepal's national sport, so I'd go and play that too, which was fun. The court we played on was right beside the river so there were often big pauses in the games after the ball was hit into the river and someone would have to dash downstream to recover it.

In my last two months I was feeling really settled and comfortable in the village. Project Trust hadn't sent volunteers to Nisi before and being new it took some time for the people to get used to me and my partner. It also didn't help that we didn't speak Nepali. Throughout my time there I worked really hard, using a book I bought in Kathmandu, to learn the language. This really helped to settle me and made the teachers and villagers much more comfortable around me. It also enabled me to learn so much more about the culture and people, which were truly unique.

In our village they also spoke a local magar language called *Kham*, which is spoken by only 26,000 people. I learnt a few basic phrases, but it was hard to learn as it isn't a written language and pronunciation was very hard as it contains more vowels than consonants; with 25 vowel sounds and 22 consonant sounds! Some of the people in our village had retained some of the semi-nomadic culture that existed there as little as twenty years ago and during monsoon some of the men would herd their cows, buffalo and goats up into the hills to graze. Before the school had computer, science and veterinary labs and before teachers who lived outside the village taught at the school, for around three months every year most of the village would travel to another village on a high flat plateau. While there, they would harvest crops and the children would go to school as it had to move too.

Back in the present day, in Nisi, traditional medicine was still commonplace. The shamans or *jhaakri* dressed in animal skins and had mountain birds hanging from their waists. When the deputy head teacher of the school was sick he was off for two days and it turned out he'd seen the shamans who had danced and beat their drums with him to rid the ghost *bhoot* from his body.

On weekends which were Friday afternoon and Saturday as Sunday was a school day, my partner and I would go to *Burtibang* (the nearest main town) to see some other volunteers who lived in the area. We would also visit teacher's and student's houses and go camping in the jungle, taking some noodles, making a fire and sleeping in bivvy bags. School started at ten o'clock and some of the best days in the village were when I got up at about six for a run or walk and got chatting to people and given *nasta* which is the word for snacks but usually implied a mix of roasted soybeans and maize. In the morning on one of the last days I visited one of the teachers who lived high up the valley side. We sat in his kitchen chatting in Nepali and drinking sour milk, *mwoi*. My nepali had improved massively so I was much more comfortable and able to joke more. He offered me breakfast which was maize polenta *aato* and green vegetables *saag*. Then when I left they sent me away with a cabbage and a bag of dried apples.



In the main school holiday, we trekked the Annapurna circuit with other volunteers. The route took us right past some of the biggest mountains in the world and up to 5416 metres which was quite special. After exams, I had planned to go to visit *Nisel Dhor*, the village where the people in Nisi would migrate to. I was going to go with my partner, another

volunteer, a couple students and their horses to carry the harvested potatoes. The mountain pass was blocked by snow, apparently a metre, so we planned to go another way. We were going to spend three or four days harvesting and then come back to Nisi hopefully burdened with potatoes and other vegetables. This is something I hope to do if I visit the country again.

I am obviously very disappointed that I had to leave Nepal early, but I still learned a great deal in the time I spent there. I also hope that I will be able to return soon to visit or do more voluntary work. This wouldn't have been possible without your support and for that I am very grateful,

Many thanks and kind regards

Hector