

Voluntary Work in Nepal

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1. Check the security and political situation from several sources before you go. Nepal has been unstable for several years, and violence is common. I recommend checking travel advice from your government and also www.nepalnews.com. The situation can change rapidly, so be prepared to change any plans you may make. It is common to see army and armed police patrols on the streets. All roads across the whole country have checkpoints where you have to get out of your vehicle and have your luggage searched.
2. Don't take a lot of luggage – you can buy most personal items far cheaper in Kathmandu than at home. The main tourist area of Thamel has many shops selling trekking gear and clothing of good quality. You'll find excellent North Face, Berghaus jackets etc at reasonable prices. You will, however, need to take specialist equipment, as local items are often low quality.
3. Every other shop is a tailor, so take advantage and have made what you can't buy off the peg.
4. Make sure you have good health arrangements. Don't skimp on this because you are going to get ill! Many international organisations used the CIWEC Clinic which is off Durbar Marg and is staffed by western doctors. They have a web site and you can subscribe to regular health newsletters.
5. If you are going to work in a remote area, make sure you have insurance for air evacuation – although even this cannot be relied upon as often phone lines are out of action. Mobile coverage is patchy outside Kathmandu and solar-powered phones cut out during the monsoon season. You need to accept that life here is more risky.
6. Have all the necessary vaccinations before you go. You can buy all common medicines at any pharmacy, but beware of imitations. If you want to make sure the medicines have come from safe, regulated sources, you need to use a private, western clinic.
7. You are likely to get bouts of diarrhoea, no matter how careful you are with food and water. In the heat, you can dehydrate very quickly. Make sure you drink plenty of water or rehydration fluid. A couple of days of ciprofloxacin usually sorts out bacterial enteritis but consult a doctor if the illness persists. You are also likely to get conjunctivitis in Kathmandu (due to the air pollution) and respiratory infections. The local talc 'Nyle' is good for heat rash and prickly heat.
8. Filter and boil your water...bit of a palaver, but well worth it. Avoid ice in drinks, salads (unless you have prepared them yourself) and ice cream from the local vendors who push a trolley.

9. Learn the language. This is vital once you get out of main tourist areas, as most locals will not speak any English. There are several language schools in Kathmandu or you can buy 'teach yourself' programmes before you go. Nepalis will appreciate your efforts!
10. You are likely to find big cultural differences between the UK and Nepal, especially if you are a woman. At times, these are perplexing and frustrating. But you need to accept them and work with the differences. Society in Nepal has a rich and complex history – so enjoy exploring it.
11. Pilgrim's book shop in Kathmandu has a fabulous and extensive collection of books on just about every aspect of Nepal.
12. Travelling on local buses is a good way to experience the country, but buses are slow and the roads arduous. Be prepared for delays. Don't expect any toilets (particularly tricky for women). Traffic accidents are common as the local buses are poorly maintained and the roads hazardous.
13. Check in with the Embassy so they have an idea where you will be going.
14. Life moves differently in Nepal – expect everything to take at least twice as long as it would at home. Be prepared to see something bizarre every day.
15. Remember that other volunteers will come along after you. Be respectful and earn respect. This means dressing appropriately for the country ie. no shorts for women.
16. Hindu, Buddhist and national holidays abound, so be prepared for festivals to interrupt work on almost a weekly basis. The main festivals of Desain and Tihar fall around October/November time and you can pretty much write off a month.
17. In many places it's a 6-day week, with Saturday being the day off.
18. The Nepali calendar has 12 months, but they don't coincide with ours, and each month can have a varying number of days from year to year. Most widely used is the Bikram Sambhat calendar, which is 57 years ahead of us!
19. Paper and pens are appreciated gifts for kids.
20. The food is going to be spicy. The staple is 'daal bhaat' – rice with lentils and curried vegetables. Usually Nepalis eat this twice a day – 10 am and in the evening. Be prepared to do likewise. Outside the tourist areas other foods may not be available and most items are seasonal. Cooking your own food is a way to blend Nepali and western ideas. Locals are always happy to explain to you what something is and how to cook it. They will happily share their food, and will appreciate trying your efforts (although they will always say it's not as good as daal bhaat!).
21. Avoid 'tito koirela' or bitter gourd. People absolutely love this small, green vegetable, but be assured, God never intended this as a food and there is no way you can cook it to make it palatable. You have been warned!

22. Try 'thomba' – this is a Tibetan beer made from fermented millet and drunk hot, through a straw. Highly recommended!
23. When you don't seem to be able to get on with things, don't worry. It may appear chaotic, but there is a system – you just haven't worked it out yet!
24. The most common thing you will hear here is 'ke garne?' (what to do?). This is used to explain everything outside your control (ie. everything)!
25. Life in Kathmandu is very different to life in rural areas. Life in Nepal is hard...but you will learn so much from it.