

# THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER

For Projects Abroad Nepal



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# CHANNELING YOUR INNER GODDESS

A Note from Michael, Projects Abroad Nepal Communications Officer

September and October are exciting months for Projects Abroad Nepal. With the monsoons ending, the best weather of the year arrives, heralding the onset of high tourist season. Drove of foreigners land at Tribhuvan International Airport to trek the nation's most famous paths, visit its stunning temples, listen to its music and share in its flavourful cuisine. At the same time, Nepal's incredibly diverse religious and cultural spectrum welcomes the beginning of a busy festival season. From *Dashain* to *Tihar*, Projects Abroad has celebrated Nepali festivals with its volunteers and the wider community.

One of the first big festivals to bring excitement to the city is *Indra Jatra*, celebrated early in September. The festival honours Indra, the Hindu king of heaven and god of rain, and is deeply connected to mythology surrounding the founding of Kathmandu. The festivities take place in and around Kathmandu's Durbar Square, where masked dances are performed and elaborate effigies displayed for eight days. The festival's highlight is the procession of the three chariots; the first two carry children as representations of Ganesh and Bhairav, the third Kathmandu's famous Royal *Kumari*.

*Indra Jatra* is a rare opportunity for Nepali's and foreigners alike to see the *Kumari*, the "living goddess." Kathmandu's Royal *Kumari* is a pre-pubescent Newari girl, honoured as the living incarnation of the goddess Durga, a manifestation of divine female energy. She goes through a rigorous selection process, much of which entails detailed physical requirements; from the shape of her teeth to the sound of her voice. The *Kumari* must also embody fearlessness in the face of terrifying ritual tests of character, some including snakes and ritual dances around buffalo heads.



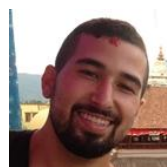
Once selected as the *Kumari*, the young girl lives with her family in the *Kumari's* palace in Durbar Square. Processions such as these during *Indra Jatra* are some of the few in which she makes public appearances. When she reaches puberty, she returns to society as a mortal young woman.

Projects Abroad volunteers and staff had the opportunity to witness the *Kumari's* chariot processions together, a great thrill shared with thousands of Nepali spectators, some of whom waited all day to see her. The procession was just one of many rituals that took place in Durbar Square over the course of the week's events.

In a country with many different religious and symbolic traditions, the *Kumari's* procession stands out as a magnificent celebration of spirituality. Even though none of our Projects Abroad staff or volunteers will ever have the chance to be a living god or goddess, there are important lessons to be

learned from her story. Though young, she is brave. Though she serves as the *Kumari* alone, she is a legacy of many who came before her.

The *Kumari* reminds us to channel our own inner goddess, and live life with the highest regard for morality and purity. In this spectacular country with so much to offer, autumn's celebrations remind us to be virtuous. The most beautiful gift we can give to Nepal is our continued service through volunteering and our appreciation for its sanctity.



**Michael Goodwin**  
Projects Abroad Nepal



# PANI

*Annika Olsen, Netherlands*

Every person possesses a certain character trait causes inner conflict with our conscience when it comes to making decisions. This is part of what makes us human. For me, the characteristics that cloud my sense of judgment are stubbornness and pride, mostly which I blame my parents for my ability to take responsibility has always been astonishing.

Now and then this part of my personality resurfaces, along with a series of poorly considered consequences. Today was a great example of this. Nepal is well into its monsoon season in July, which means that precipitation becomes a part of the daily life. I embrace the rain as if it is my best friend, for the cool fresh wetness is a nice break from the smell of my own dripping sweat. So, of course, an umbrella is the last item I would be willing to take with me to the hospital.

This morning I woke up to the sound of raindrops cleaning the world of the humidity and heat if only for an hour. "At least now I can have a pleasant trip to the hospital," I triumphantly thought to myself. My host mother actually warned me that morning never to underestimate the power and the unexpectedness of a monsoon storm. She even offered me her umbrella telling me that one does not want to be soaked when working at the hospital. I, not wanting to carry the extra weight, respectfully declined. Who needs umbrellas anyway? The rain was a natural shower that I was happy to receive.

In a nutshell, on my way to the hospital it started to rain and within 5 minutes I was completely soaked. Every sane person pulled out their umbrella but not the stubborn foreign girl. However, the moment I entered the medical ward, which is where I work, I could see several of the nurses' heads turn and this is when the laughter started. The worst part was that the hospital staff was finally starting to take me seriously. Well, having a cleaning lady following me around the med wing with a mop all day threw the result of my efforts over the last couple of days out of the window.

From then I became known as *Pani*, which is the Nepali word for water. Apparently I was so soaked that "wet" was an insufficient description of my state. Not only were the nurses referring to me in this manner, but so were the patients. Still, it is an improvement on not knowing my name at all. Instead of gaining respect, it was my charming silly self that enabled me, for the first time, to earn the acceptance of everyone in the ward. Nurses were willing to teach me their daily routines, doctors were willing to explain their findings during rounds in more detail and it was easier to engage in casual conversation. Why? This is still a mystery to me but I like to believe that today I actually made a

difference. Not because of my medical knowledge or experience (for I have none) but due to the fact that, in a room with 60 patients suffering from diseases that range from fever to terminal illness, I managed to lighten the despair and dark atmosphere, even just for a day. The sparks of amusement seen on the faces of patients and family members are rare in such an environment. All I could do was just laugh along with them, for what is the point of encountering embarrassment, if you cannot share the comedy with others. So, watch out world, here comes *Pani*!



## PHOTO OF THE MONTH

JACOB REIMER



**I took this photo just an hour after arriving in Pokhara, tired from a long trip from Chitwan. I was walking along the lakeside just as the sun was setting behind the hills and thought the colourful boats on Phewa Tal looked beautiful in the dim light. The view made my night.**

**-Jacob Reimer, Denmark**



# Bird Watching

*Jessica Vance, Projects Abroad Nepal Operations Manager*

If you had asked me which activity sounded the least appealing to me before I had visited our conservation project; bird watching would have undoubtedly been my answer. After all, up until this journey my main experience with birds was listening to my mother call pigeons “rats with wings”. While I am aware that birds are an important part of any environment, it is easy to take them for granted as they can be thought of as commonplace to the ignorant eye.



Fortunately my view on birds was drastically changed when, on my last day at the conservation project, we participated in a bird-watching trek to an area known as Little Paradise. The trek took all day as it was a ten-kilometer return journey, but the incredible landscapes and the amazing birds we saw on the way made the trip an unforgettable one! At first trying to identify the birds was difficult, as I couldn't differentiate between anything with wings, but the conservation staff was really helpful with explaining how to identify each of the birds we were seeing. During our trip we saw scarlet minivets, grey bush chats, bearded vultures, and Bonelli's eagles along with many others. By the end of our trek I had a much greater appreciation for how diverse birds can be.

In addition to my newly found appreciation for bird watching, the scenic mountain views were unforgettable. Anyone who comes to the conservation project has the unique opportunity of living and working in the middle of the beautiful Annapurna mountain range. The walking may be physically challenging, but the thrill of spotting some brilliantly colored wings against the mountain panoramas is well worth the price of a few sore limbs.

# MY NEPAL

*Arianna Injeian, United States*



There is so much that could be said about Nepal. There is never a dull moment; whether you are with your host family or at your placement. My host family was so open, caring and considerate. It took no time to warm up to them and I miss them still! We bonded over meals, and they even taught me how to cook some traditional Nepali food. Being with a host family makes the experience so much more fulfilling and comfortable.

I was very lucky to have been placed at the MSPN, which is by far the most amazing organization I have ever encountered. The work that takes place there is so beautiful and organic, you can't help but love everyone and everything. I spent my days entertaining the children, all of whom have HIV/AIDS. They had more energy and happiness in them than any child I've met! They made everything about my trip absolutely amazing and I think about them all the time. My time spent at the MSPN never felt purposeless. I was always kept busy and felt that what I was doing was truly significant. Even if it was just making a child laugh, it felt so rewarding.

Along with the amazing placements in Nepal, the country itself has so much to offer. On the weekends, I took it upon myself to befriend many other excited and adventurous volunteers who were just as eager as I was to explore the land. I spent a weekend walking through Patan and Bhaktapur Durbar Squares, stopping at all the temples along the way and shopping on every street. I travelled to Bodnath and Swayambunath to experience the amazing wonders of the Buddhist *stuppas* and philosophy, embracing the calm, quiet and clean surroundings. Most special was my trip to Pokhara as I had always dreamed about the Himalayas, but seeing them in the flesh is one hundred times more remarkable. My fellow volunteers and I took a 4:00 am hike to Sarangkot to see the sunrise over the Himalayas. When the clouds blew away and the sun rose over the highest peak, we saw the most amazing mountains in the world. Nothing could compare.

Travelling to Nepal is an experience that I feel every human being should have the opportunity to do. Everything from the people, to the colourful culture and the delicious little *momos* all make the trip so unforgettable. Even after eating *dal bhat* regularly, I (sort of) miss it! I have made lasting connections in one of the most beautiful countries in the world, one that I hope to return to soon!



# TWO KAROLINAS

*Michael Goodwin, Projects Abroad Nepal Communications Officer*



Karolina and Karolina, two young Polish women, became great friends in Nepal. Hailing from different areas of Poland, the Karolina's met on the first day of their 2 week special medical volunteer program in Chitwan with Projects Abroad. Karolina Kućko, from Gdansk, and Karolina Jasiejko, from Szczecin, also spent an additional week as medical volunteers at Alka Hospital in Kathmandu.

Both are hoping to study medicine at university and the two weeks in Chitwan presented a great opportunity to learn about different areas of health care in Nepal. From a cancer treatment centre to a family planning clinic, the group spoke with and observed doctors in many fields. "Our time in the surgical department was the most thrilling experience of my time in Chitwan," said Kućko, "and the opportunity to closely observe surgery as high school students is not one we have in Poland." Assisting in an emergency unit in Chitwan was Jasiejko's fondest memory from her two weeks in Chitwan medical placements. "The opportunity to interact with patients was remarkable," she said. "The doctors we worked with were friendly, as were the people we met on the street. Nepali people were very open, always eager to greet us with 'Namaste.' We learned so much about the culture from speaking with locals as we explored the city."

Their third week in Nepal was a very different experience, as both Karolinas not only had greater independence as volunteers at Alka, but also lived together with a Nepali family. "The host family experience made our third week so special," said Kućko. "I recommend the it as a great way to learn more about Nepal," Jasiejko remarked, "our family was so helpful, and just as curious about us as we

were about them."

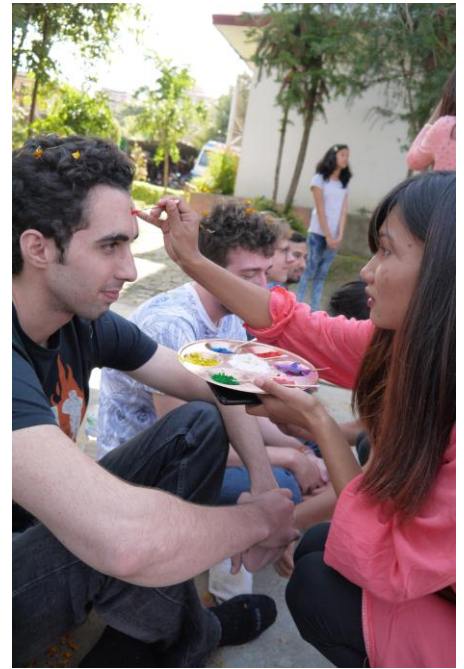
At Alka, both young women spent time in dental, emergency, paediatric and orthopaedic units. "I expected to enjoy surgery and emergency medicine the most," Jasiejko said of her experience in Kathmandu, "but I appreciated our time in orthopaedic medicine the most as I had a greater chance to speak with patients while learning about the routine of outpatient medicine. I never thought I would be interested in orthopaedics, but I am now fascinated with the specialty."

Outside of the hospitals, Kućko and Jasiejko shared many exciting cultural outings with their fellow volunteers. "From canoeing, to a Nepalese dance show and *momo*-making" remarked Kućko, "there were too many highlights to pick just one."

Both Karolina's came to Nepal unsure if a medical career was in their future and both left certain that medicine is for them. "I used the experience to decide whether I will pursue medicine; I now know that I want to be a doctor," Kućko declared. Jasiejko agreed, "My three weeks in Nepal confirmed that I want to be a doctor."

As both young women return to Poland and enter their final year of high school, making preparations to study medicine, they plan to keep in touch with each other and the many other international students they met through Projects Abroad. "I'll miss Nepal," said Kućko, "but at least I'll be able to visit Karolina," added Jasiejko.





In October, Projects Abroad Nepal volunteers celebrated the festivals of *Dashain* and *Tihar* by receiving offerings of *tikka* and blessings by operations and placement staff.

Wishing a joyous and prosperous festival season to all!





# DASHAIN

*Genevieve Cox, Projects Abroad Nepal Teaching and Care Coordinator*

Whenever I travel, it's the cultural nuances, brash and subtle, the people and the vistas that make it such a fascinating experience. As September ended and October began, a trip to Chitwan and the *Dashain* festival meant I was able to witness all of these things.

*Dashain* grew to a close, which left Thamel eerily quiet. Around Nayabazar, men sauntered home with chickens and ducks under each arm and goats on their shoulders. It teaches you not to get attached to the herds tied up outside the butchers! To get a taste of *Dashain*, the volunteers were invited to one of the children's homes for *tikkas* and *dal bhat*. The *tikkas* are made up of a red paste mixed with rice that is applied to everyone's foreheads by the elders. There is a superstition that the girl who's *tikka* stays on for the longest will be lucky in love that year – unfortunately for me I had just finished a raucous game of football and my *tikka* immediately began its journey down my face with pieces of red rice dripping into my *dal*, not sure what that says about my upcoming love life.

A particularly lovely *Dashain* tradition is for communities to come together and build a huge bamboo swing for the children. Apparently the swings are there to remove ill-feeling and announce a happy year. These swings are found even in the tiny villages prepared along the road up to Chitwan. It does not take long to reach the countryside and its beauty just outside of Kathmandu. The greenery is startling in comparison to the dust of Kathmandu and the road curves alongside a river dotted with mini waterfalls and families washing in the shallow waters. There are a few bridges across but at one point there are just two wires strung high across the river with a tiny cable car attached with two women inside. A man tightrope walks the wires, pushing the cable car to the other side. I just hope he gets paid more than the taxi drivers.

Fascinated by a puzzle book I had with me, a young Nepali girl, Kriti, came and sat with me and we discussed the finer things in life: school, jewellery, family, and then once we'd exhausted her knowledge of English and my sign language; we sat in happy silence and watched the verdant world go by.

