



First time back in Nepal after 25 years. Kathmandu has changed, a much larger city, very built up, buildings bigger and mostly modern boxes of concrete and brick, chaotic traffic and fumes. Thamel is similarly more built up and busy but still has a laid back feel. The local people are friendly and both our hotel and New Orleans Restaurant, where we had supper on the first evening, are clean and well presented – a huge improvement from 1990 when things were much more down to earth!



Driving east through the Kathmandu Valley on Wednesday morning, buildings sprawl almost all the way across the valley floor in all directions, few paddy fields remain, lorries, cars, motorbikes, rubbish strewn everywhere, and it is good to climb into the hills. So many people have come down into the Valley from the villages to seek a better life since I was last here, and it has dramatically changed the character of what was a beautiful place. Air quality leaves a lot to be desired.

Later in the morning we reach Megh Ali's Sun Kosi Camp in Sindapulchowk. Megh has been instrumental in working to improve and conserve rivers in Nepal over the last 15 years, in particular the Bagmati river in Kathmandu, and is one of YYY Foundation's partners in Nepal. Sindapulchowk suffered hugely in last year's earthquake.

In the afternoon we drive up with Megh to Unkhubari village by jeep – it looks hard enough for a jeep on the dirt road, so it is a surprise to find a local bus coming down the other way. The scenery is dramatic, hills disappearing into the haze. There is widespread evidence of destruction from the earthquake around the village; houses still standing have their upper floors removed and a corrugated iron roof over the ground floor, and lots of families are living in very basic shacks or under iron shelters.

YYY Foundation has bought a piece of land for the village's new school, their previous one having come down in the earthquake, and the lower caste people owning no land to replace it. Having secured the land, they have been able to raise more money, and the new school is already being built. The school children are out to greet us in their uniforms, along with some local dignitaries. It is very colourful. They give us a warm welcome, and I feel a deep sense of gratitude from the people I meet. We are entertained with songs and dancing, and there are quite lengthy speeches – it all becomes quite formal. I hand over the land documents and we receive a special plaque which they must have gone to a lot of trouble to produce. With scarves and flowers, it is a moving experience. It would be great to return in a year or two when the school is all finished, and meet them again.



On Thursday we move up the valley to Sukete Beach, owned by our other close NGO in Nepal Mahendra Thapa. We are working closely with Mahendra and his organisation Mandala and some of Mandala's staff, especially Milan who is with us. Mid morning we travel again by jeep up to Suranchour, a village high in the hills where we have co-funded a new school. I have seen photos of the destruction of the old building, so it is gratifying to see the new school finished and painted. Once more we have a wonderful greeting from the children and villagers, a more informal gathering this time. It is a fantastic thing to see them with their new building, and as at Unkhubari we are entertained with music and dancing.

The children are lovely. I am struck by the peace of the place, which really is in an amazing location, and how happy the kids seem. At both schools we distribute some things for the kids, children's books, exercise books, pencils and crayons, and some fruit and biscuits, and games immediately start here with skipping ropes and footballs.



It looks as though the village was substantially destroyed by the earthquake, and the villagers are living in extremely basic conditions. I have had an increasing sense of shock since my arrival at the conditions in which so many people live here, and it is distressing to see many villagers living under corrugated iron shelters a year on – I can only imagine how hot it must get under these shelters.

We travel back to Kathmandu on Thursday and visit Bhaktapur on the way, one of the Valley's three major cities. Sarah [YYY Foundation co-founder] takes us on a walk through the old town, seeing the famous Durbar Square and the less visited Potters Square full of pots drying in the sun. Behind the facades of many streets we see extensive destruction, and many buildings in a state of collapse, often still inhabited unbelievably. A year on from the earthquake there is clearly a massive job of reconstruction here alone, and it is hard to see how that is going to be done.

After another day in Kathmandu, we are pleased to be on the move heading West and South. On Saturday we drive along the main highway West – as with our trip East the Valley is built up all the way to the hills. We stop after 2 or 3 hours, walking across a suspended bridge over the Trisuli river to visit Jumlingtar school in Gorkha District which we have helped to fund; the District was hit hard north of the Trisuli by the earthquake, and the village again shows extensive signs of destruction. Despite being on holiday, the children have come in to see us with their teachers and the Head Mistress. They are such calm, friendly people. After another warm welcome we give them the books and games we have brought for them.



After lunch, a short way further on and crossing the river again we visit another village where the school was destroyed last year. The remains of the old school have been cleared, leaving a large pile of bricks, and there is a basic bamboo structure with open sides which is being used as a temporary school for the kids. It may be that we can help with rebuilding this school. There are hundreds of villages like this one looking for help, dependent on finding funding from organisations like ours - it is a sobering thought. The school aside, the village itself was less damaged, which is good to see, and many of the buildings remind me of the houses we saw trekking in the hills 25 years ago.

The next morning we are in the flat lands of the Terai next to Chitwan National Park, staying in Sauraha. We enjoy an early morning trip on the river and visit the elephant breeding centre here, which has been instrumental in increasing the population of elephants in the Park affected by poaching. Later we drive over to a local Chepang orphanage, which Mandala is helping. I am deeply moved by this place. It is very basic, and to think of children living here is really distressing, but the fact is they are cared for, have a roof over their heads, are fed and looked after. There are few children here at this time but we give the staff a mixture of books and toys which Sarah has organised, including building blocks and lego.

The orphanage provides help for children of the Chepang caste, which is one of the lowest and poorest. The numbers of children increased substantially after the earthquake, and there are now around 180 kids who live here. They use about 90 kilos of rice every day to feed the kids when they are all here, at a daily cost of around £30, and we hear that they struggle to be able to provide food at times. One of the Gurung's local friends from Sauraha who has come with us has been providing some help with this. It would be great to see if we can raise some money to help here as well going forwards.

We move on next to Pokhara, where I am hoping to visit Sahara, a local charity which has done fantastic things for Nepalese street children over many years, and which I know Sera and Sarah have helped – it is a model for local Nepalese organisations working to improve lives, and becoming self sufficient over time. And I am also hoping to see the mountains, which so far have remained hidden behind the dust and haze – they are an amazing sight from Pokhara.

A week in Nepal. I am glad that I got involved with our charity, and it has been a great pleasure to see that we have at least been able to give a bit of help to a small number of communities which have suffered so much here in the last year. It seems like a bit of a drop in an ocean, but many people here need all the help they can get.



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