



Volunteer Handbook Supplement for Kathmandu, Nepal

Like all big cities around the world, Kathmandu is a mixture of the good, the bad and the ugly.

You will experience unbearable heat, heaps of trash on the ground, dusty and polluted air, crazy traffic, non-stop horns, packs of street dogs, occasional beggars and touts, and see the poverty and struggle of many locals.

But you will also find incredibly friendly people, an endlessly fascinating culture, warm and supportive host families, worthwhile volunteer projects, delicious food, beautiful landscapes, museums and ancient temples to visit, the arts, classes for yoga and meditation – the list goes on and on!

Of all the countries where I send volunteers, Nepal to me is one of the most challenging for foreign travelers (along with India). It is the first country I traveled to abroad, and it easily remains one of my favorites. It's a place where you might have some long and frustrating days – but even before you leave Nepal, you'll already be making plans to return!

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Scott D. Burke".

Scott Burke
Founder & Director
Cosmic Volunteers INC

411 Shurs Lane, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19128 USA
Office: +1-215.609.4196
scott@cosmicvolunteers.org
www.cosmicvolunteers.org

Culture Shock

The first 24-48 hours in Kathmandu are critical in your cultural adjustment, so please try not to make any negative judgments about Nepal during this period. You are likely to feel tired, hot and sweaty, and somewhat overwhelmed by the new sights, sounds, etiquette, etc.

*** Expect the unexpected at all times ***

The best way to handle any culture shock is to have an open mind and relaxed attitude.

A common pattern for volunteers is as follows:

- First few days: They do not like Nepal at all and cannot wait to go home.
- By end of first week: They find the country tolerable, maybe even pleasant.
- Rest of stay: They fall in love with the country's culture and people.
- End of stay: They wish they could stay longer and often shed tears upon leaving.

Such a roller coaster can drive foreigners crazy, especially if they have not traveled abroad much or at all. Hopefully, you will eventually find, as myself and hundreds of other volunteers have, that Kathmandu (and Nepal overall) is one of the friendliest, safest places to travel anywhere in the world, where you can make some lifelong friendships while helping out Nepalis through your volunteer work.

Major things to keep in mind

- Always carry your passport on your person during air travel (not your bags)
- Never drink tap water (at airports and of course while in Kathmandu)
- PREPARE TO BE UNPREPARED!

The last phrase was told to me in Delhi by a 19 year old volunteer while I was there in April 2011. Before she left her parents' home in the UK a month previous, she felt she had consumed as much information as possible in preparation for her trip. Then she arrived in Delhi – and it was like she hadn't prepared at all! But after a week or so in India, she truly started to feel like an insider who could actually give tours of the place – and she was right. So before arriving in Nepal, please try not to be too concerned about not knowing enough. That's why you're going there, to learn about Nepal and help locals – as a volunteer and an insider!

Packing List

In terms of what to bring from home, there are three things that I would highly recommend:

- Your laptop (to backup photos, keep a journal, sometimes get WIFI)
- Bug spray with DEET
- Small lock(s) - so you can lock valuable in your suitcase during the day

Suggested packing list:

Carry-On Bag

- Passport
- Plane Ticket
- Contact information of Nepal Coordinators, Scott Burke, Family/friends
- 2 passport photos + \$25 USD in cash (only if getting your visa in Kathmandu)
- Travel Insurance Policy
- Cash (at least \$100 USD or equivalent)
- Credit card(s)
- Travelers Checks (if you have them)
- Any prescription medicine
- Any electronic equipment (laptops, mobile phone, camera, mp3 player)
- Toiletries (Toothbrush/paste, contact lens solution/case)
- Reading materials
- Pen(s)

Checked Baggage

- 4-6 pair of long pants (a pair of jeans is OK but can be hot)
- 1-2 pairs shorts
- 7-10 short-sleeved tops/t-shirts
- 1-2 long-sleeve shirts
- 4-6 pair of socks
- Sturdy sneakers / shoes for walking
- Sandals / flip-flops
- Sleepwear: long-sleeved shirt(s) and long bottoms (avoid mosquitoes)
- Lightweight jacket (during Nov-Feb)
- Sun screen
- Bug spray with DEET (I use Jungle Juice)
- Hat (for sun)
- Paper journal / pens
- Eye re-wetting drops (whether you wear contacts or not) because Nepal is very dusty.
- Hand sanitizer
- Over-the-counter medications for pain relief, fever, diarrhea
- Toiletries (soap, shampoo etc)
- Notebooks, pens, paper
- Small travel pack/day pack
- Lightweight, quick-dry towel for bathing

Other Packing Tips

- > There is no need to bring bedding, pillows etc.
- > Theft can be a problem on flights to destinations like Nepal, so do not pack anything valuable in your checked luggage. Pack valuables in a carry-on bag such as a laptop, camera, cash, jewelry, gifts etc.
- > Do not over-pack. Except for some prescription medicine, you can buy anything in Nepal that you forget or leave home on purpose, including toiletries, clothes, electronics, etc.
- > Luggage:
Instead of new / nice luggage, I suggest buying a cheap suitcase at a thrift store. Especially harder-type suitcase that will protect your stuff. Also use a small backpack as a carry-on (for laptop, any electronics, a few toiletries). I am not a fan of huge backpacks, as they seem very hard on one's back and they don't always have wheels. Also duffel bags are too soft and things tend to get broken inside. Overall bags seem to get really roughed up on these international flights (in 2010 I got back from Vietnam to find I had yet another suitcase ruined, in-transit – with a wheel missing).
- > What NOT to bring:
 - 1) Plug adapter for electrical appliances. But them in Nepal, as they cost only \$1 USD there and will definitely work. Most host families even have extra.
 - 2) Things like items for donation to orphanages or sports equipment etc: You can buy them cheaply in Kathmandu

Passport

When flying, always carry your passport on your person and not your bags. I've found that cargo pants with deep/secure pockets are a good place to hold the passport. I also put my own passport in a Ziploc baggie at all times, to protect it from sweat / dirt / humidity / spilled drinks -- both when flying and when in Nepal. You do not need to carry your passport to your volunteer job each day. However, if you travel outside Kathmandu, please carry your passport with you (again - on your person).

Arrival Process in Kathmandu

If you already have a visa for Nepal:

When you leave the plane in Kathmandu, you will head to Immigration to get your passport stamped. Then, follow the rest of the steps below, starting with “The Immigration officer...”

If you do NOT already have a visa for Nepal:

You must obtain a "tourist" visa at the airport upon arrival in Kathmandu. You must have two passport photos, the visa application (available at airport and on plane), and at least \$25 USD in cash for the visa fee. Remember, you are getting the "tourist" visa, and for your address in Nepal use your host family's address (see your Program Document).

- > The Immigration officer might only stamp your passport to allow you to stay 30 days. If you are staying more than 30 days, our local coordinator will help you extend the visa after you are in Nepal a few weeks.
- > After passing through Immigration, you will then go to baggage claim to collect your bags. Next, you will walk through Customs (go through the "green" line) where they may x-ray your bags.
- > Next, I strongly recommend that you go to one of the money exchange counters inside the airport and exchange at least \$50 for Nepali Rupees (ask for small denominations). The exchange rate is about \$1 USD = 72 Rupees. (It is always a good idea to leave the airport in any foreign country with local currency on you, even with a prearranged airport pickup.)
- > Go to the arrivals hall and look for our Coordinator who will be holding a sign with your name on it. If you do not see the coordinator, walk outside the exit doors and look for them.
- > The scene outside the airport's exit doors can sometimes look like mayhem, with hundreds of people waiting for passengers. You will probably be approached by ultra-aggressive taxi and hotel "touts" offering rides, hotels, tour packages etc. It is important that you appear calm (even if you have to fake it), and simply smile and tell them a friend is already meeting you at the airport. **Do not let anyone take your bags from you!** This is a common trick by the touts, who will then try to lead you to their vehicle. (I have seen these rascals literally pick up a flustered tourist off the ground by his elbows and try to carry him to a taxi – so stand your ground!).
- > Your Coordinator will take you from the airport to your host family in Kathmandu. The ride from the airport could take 20-60 minutes, depending on traffic. If you want to call back home to let a family member/friend know you arrived safely, ask your Coordinator and they will let you use their mobile.
- > Your taxi ride from the airport can really provide you with an great insights into the people, the sights, sounds, and smells(!) of Nepal. So watch, listen, smile, ask questions, and listen (to the endless car horns!).

> As *Verge Magazine* writes: "Fifteen minutes on a bus usually teaches you more about a country's social, political, and economic conditions than three hours studying a guidebook." My midnight ride 10 years ago from the airport in Kathmandu to my hotel remains one of the most vivid experience of my travel life! Not because it was dangerous, just that everything was so foreign and new to me, as this was my first trip abroad.

Flight Delays

If your flight into Kathmandu is delayed for any reason, please first call your Coordinator in Nepal, then call Scott Burke – both 24 hours.

If You Don't Meet Our Coordinator

Although it has never happened in our 10 year history, we still give our volunteers instruction on what to do if they do not meet our coordinator at the airport for whatever reason. If this happens, please first call your Coordinator in Nepal then Scott Burke – both 24 hours. If you cannot reach us, please wait 1 hour or so for the Coordinator to appear. If they still do not come, hire a taxi to take you to the hotel called "Hotel Visit Nepal". The address is 'Z' Street, Thamel, Kathmandu. Tel: +977-1-4701384. The manager is Mr. Parashuram who knows us and hosts our volunteers sometimes. The taxi should be around \$10 (700+ rupees) and the rooms are \$10-\$25 per night. We will reimburse you for all of these expenses.

Jet Lag

Flying across multiple time zones disrupts your body's circadian rhythm, leading to sleep problems and other symptoms which fall under the condition known as "jet lag."

Symptoms often include insomnia, waking early, excessive sleepiness, headaches, irritability, digestive problems like constipation or diarrhea, muscle aches, and difficulty concentrating. Younger travelers and female travelers are more susceptible to jet lag, while some travelers are not affected much.

As a general guideline, the recovery rate from jet lag is one day per time zone traveled. So if you live in New York (approx 9 hours behind Nepal), it will take you about nine days to recover from the jet lag.

To recover from jet lag:

- Drink plenty of water before, during and after your flight
- Try to sleep on the plane if it's nighttime in Nepal
- Adjust to the local day/night schedule immediately
- Try not to sleep until nighttime in Nepal, no matter how tired you are
- Exercise daily (during daylight hours, especially early morning)
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol

Your First Days in Nepal

Because arrival days and time differ among volunteers, the exact schedule the first couple of days usually varies. But generally speaking: In the first 24-48 hours, you will:

- ⤴ Meet your host family
- ⤴ Go around Kathmandu with our Coordinator for orientation, as they explain the culture, safety issues, how to get around etc.
- ⤴ Visit several tourist spots with our Coordinator. Some of the possibilities include Durbar Square, Pashupatinath (massive Hindu Temple), Bodhnath (Boudha) Tibetan/Buddhist area, and Swayambhunath (Monkey Temple).
- ⤴ Our Coordinator will take you to your volunteer placement for introductions and to begin work.

Misc Travel Tips for Nepal

- ⤴ Only drink water that is bottled or boiled
- ⤴ Do not go swimming under any circumstances
- ⤴ Wash your hands frequently (bring hand sanitizer)
- ⤴ Don't be flashy with cash, cameras, jewelry etc.

Toilets

You will not always find “western” toilets in Nepal. Instead, locals often use a porcelain hole-in-the-floor ([see photo](#)). You will find these both at host families as well as at public places like hotels. The goal is to squat over the hole and do your business. **There is often no toilet paper.** So to clean up, there is a bucket of water with which to wash yourself and flush everything down the hole. Everyone uses their left hand to clean up, hence the right-hand only custom for eating and touching. If you want to use paper, buy it in Nepal as soon as you arrive. Same thing for anti-bacterial lotion for your hands. Most hotels and host families (in Kathmandu) have western toilets. Otherwise, be prepared to have to regularly use some of the grossest toilets in the world!

Getting Around

There are many options for getting around Kathmandu. Walking is the best experience, as it's always better to see a place at ground level. However if you have a longer commute to work or any other place, there are many options. Here are the options in order of popularity with volunteers:

- ▲ [Tuk-tuk](#) (aka "tempo"): passengers crowd into the back, for short and medium length rides. They're fixed price, and usually numbered by route.
- ▲ [Auto-rickshaw](#): "private" ride for short rides, like a taxi. Agree on fare before getting in.
- ▲ [Minivan](#): For medium length rides. They're fixed price, and usually numbered by route.
- ▲ [Taxi](#): most expensive (insist on price before getting in; most drivers don't use meter)
- ▲ [Large bus](#): for both inside Kathmandu and long trips to other places in Nepal
- ▲ [Bicycle rickshaw](#): Not my style, I feel it's degrading. But it's your choice.

Life at the Host Family

- ▲ Your family provides breakfast and dinner.
- ▲ Most volunteers don't eat lunch with host family; they go to local shops.
- ▲ Most families are vegetarian.
- ▲ Most food is spicy - although they will tone it down for you upon request.
- ▲ They will have clean, filtered water for you.
- ▲ Beds are usually hard as a rock.
- ▲ There is rarely air-conditioning.
- ▲ When not in your room, lock valuables in closet or suitcase (passport, cash, laptop).
- ▲ Mosquitoes are a problem! They start biting at sundown, so use bug spray.
- ▲ Wash your own laundry (it's usually done by hand).
- ▲ Absolutely no overnight guests without approval by host family.
- ▲ Ask host family how to turn on the hot water
- ▲ Don't expect much water pressure out of the shower
- ▲ Some families have a small temple inside their house

Internet

Some families do have WIFI, so feel free to bring your laptop. If not, you can always get online at one of the Internet cafes which are all over the city. Our host families strongly prefer that volunteers do not use the family's computer.

Phones

I strongly encourage you to have a mobile phone in Nepal. This can be a phone you bring from home or a phone you purchase in Nepal.

Phone from home

If your phone from home is "locked," you can take the phone to shops in Nepal who will "unlock" the phone for a small fee. With an unlocked phone, you just need to buy a SIM card in Nepal. The SIM card will have a local Nepali telephone number.

Phone bought in Nepal

I RECOMMEND THIS OPTION.

New mobile phones in Nepal start at around \$25 USD. The shops usually require you to give them a copy of your passport and visa as well as a passport sized photo. (Don't waste the time or money on getting the copies and photo done at home – our Coordinator will show you where to do it in Kathmandu.) Mobile phone usage in Nepal is mostly pay-as-you-go. You buy "talk time" credits from any phone shops. Incoming calls and texts are free – including international ones.

We have found the phone infrastructure in Nepal to be spotty and sometimes unreliable, with regular dropped calls or no connectivity. **Do not rely on text messages as a means of communicating, whether local or international, because they often do not go through.** Voice calls are the most reliable way to communicate by phone both in Nepal and back home.

The best ways for people back home to call your cell phone is to:

- 1) call phone-to-phone: by buying a phone card from a place like www.nobelcom.com, or
- 2) Skype-to-phone: they would use Skype to call your cell phone (they need to buy credit on Skype).

Dress Code

For your volunteer work, I recommend long pants, short-sleeve shirt, and either flip-flops or closed-toe shoes. Please do not wear tight fitting or revealing clothes – even if you see other volunteers breaking these rules. It is really disrespectful of the culture.

Money Matters

Nepal is largely a cash-based society, so expect to pay cash for everything. Credit cards are not always accepted, except at higher-end hotels and travel companies. Even where credit / debit cards are accepted, I still recommend cash because of the security risk. There are ATM's available everywhere in Kathmandu (although not all of them work with foreign cards). If you reach your ATM withdraw limit and need more cash, you can walk into most banks with your passport and ATM card and have a teller do a larger transaction. We've found that the ATM daily limit is about \$200 USD.

Safety

Kathmandu is overall a safe city if you use common sense. Even female volunteers have never had any serious issues with security in Kathmandu and throughout Nepal. I encourage you to walk around with our coordinators and other trusted locals to see the place on ground level and get to know the place intimately.

Please follow these safety precautions:

- Lock your passport, cash, camera and other valuables inside your luggage when you are not in your room. It is usually best to bring small locks from home.
- Beggars and touts are usually only a problem at tourist monuments and backpacker areas.
- Be careful about street dogs at night! They are territorial and might follow you - don't run though, just stop.
- Do not walk alone at night - say after 8pm (hire a vehicle).
- Watch for pickpockets on crowded streets, markets, bus stations, and tourist venues.
- Never admit to strangers to being alone; tell them your friend / parents will join you in a few minutes.
- Do not go swimming at all. (Drowning and traffic accidents are the leading causes of injury and illness for travelers abroad.)

Photos, Video, Electronics

- > Always ask before taking a photo or video of someone.
- > Be very careful when wielding your camera in public – for anti-theft purposes. The worst place for a camera abroad is usually around your neck, as it's visible and easy to snatch from you. When flying or on a bus: always pack electronic equipment in your carry-on bag (laptop, cameras, mp3 player etc) so they are always in sight.
- > Always back-up your photos/video regularly – even on a daily basis! Transfer them to a laptop, smart phone, pen drive – anything so that you have backups in case your camera is lost/stolen/damaged.

Miscellaneous Information

- ▲ Greetings are very important in Nepal. This is especially true when you are greeting elders, guests, or colleagues
- ▲ Formal greetings: Nepalis press their palms together in a prayer-like gesture and say “Namaste”.
- ▲ Non-formal greetings: Either a western handshake or “Namaste” with no gesture.
- ▲ Not sure what greeting to use? Return the same greeting given to you.
- ▲ When answering a question, Nepalis indicate “Yes” by moving their head side to side in a rolling motion. It can look like a “no” to the untrained western eye!
- ▲ Those receiving gifts usually will not open the gift in front of the giver. This is in case the gift is a meager one, so that the giver isn’t embarrassed.
- ▲ Do not eat from another person's plate.
- ▲ Never touch your lips to a bottle – in case you share the bottle with others.
- ▲ Hand Etiquette:
 - ▲ Only use your right hand to eat, shake hands, or hand an object to someone.
 - ▲ Never touch another person’s food, plate, or cooking utensil.
 - ▲ Touching a child’s head can be considered rude.
 - ▲ Never point – it is considered rude here.
- ▲ Foot Etiquette:
 - ▲ Remove your shoes before entering any home or temple/shrine.
 - ▲ Never touch anything with your feet. It’s “unclean” to Nepalis.
 - ▲ If your foot touches someone, apologize immediately.
 - ▲ Never step over the legs of someone sitting in the on the floor.
- ▲ Always ask permission to enter a temple.
- ▲ Always walk clockwise around temples or stupas.
- ▲ Male (platonic) friends often hold hands.
- ▲ Public affection between heterosexual men and women is rare and frowned upon.
- ▲ Most Nepalis are asleep by 8:00 pm, even in Kathmandu.
- ▲ Nightclubs and bars exist but mostly in the Thamel neighborhood.
- ▲ Avoid touching someone dressed all in white – they’ve had a recent family death.
- ▲ Be very careful with your bags in markets and crowded streets.
- ▲ Always ask someone before taking their photo or video.
- ▲ Water: Never drink tap water. Drink only bottled water or boiled water.
- ▲ Do not have any contact with live animals on the street.

Overall Impression of Nepal

I encourage you to read the history sections about Nepal, in whatever guide book you have (like Lonely Planet, Moon Handbook etc).

Knowing some of the major events, themes and personalities in any country's history will help you begin to gain an understanding about their culture, people and worldview.

For example, for a foreigner coming to America, I would tell them to have some familiarity with the following: America began as a colony of England; Transatlantic slave trade, Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War, the Depression, both World Wars, the Civil Rights movement, technological advancements, Puritanism, “American Optimism” etc.

For Nepal, some of the major things to become familiar with before you get off the plane in Kathmandu:

- ⤴ Nepal was essentially closed to the outside world until the 1950s.
- ⤴ Most Nepalis still make their living from agriculture in some way.
- ⤴ Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world.
- ⤴ Religion dominates most people lives (Hinduism mostly).
- ⤴ Most foreigners come to Nepal for adventure travel, including trekking in the Himalayas.
- ⤴ The most popular time of year for these tourists is October-January when skies are clear.
- ⤴ Nepal had a monarchy for 150+ years – but it was abolished in 2007.
- ⤴ King Tribhuvan was king from 1911-1955. Many things are named after him, including the international airport in Kathmandu.
- ⤴ King Birendra (ruling 1972–2001) was forced to accept constitutional reforms and to establish a multiparty parliament that took seat in 1991 .
- ⤴ The royal family was murdered in 2001 – by one of their sons.
- ⤴ Maoists (communists) waged a war from 1995-2005 (led by “Prachanda”).
- ⤴ The Maoist continue to dominate the news even today.
- ⤴ India and China still play major roles in Nepal.