



Volunteer Handbook to Nepal

Namaste!

Welcome to our Volunteer Handbook to Nepal.

While no person or book or website can give a new traveler to Nepal a full understanding of its culture, we believe that this Handbook will go a long way in preparing you for your trip and the living experience there.

We have spent years revising this Handbook, based on the experiences of our volunteers and staff who have spent significant time in Nepal. They have all contributed their unique insights and advice to the information in this Handbook.

Although there is some overlap, our Nepal Volunteer Handbook does not try to duplicate all of the general travel information you will find in published guide books such as **Lonely Planet Nepal**.

Our main focus in the Nepal Volunteer Handbook is on travel information that is specifically relevant to a volunteer like yourself who will serve others in Nepal and become a member of the local community.

We encourage you to share the Nepal Volunteer Handbook with your family and friends and anyone else interested in your trip to Nepal. We also strongly recommend taking a copy with you on your trip.

As always, if you have any questions about the Nepal Volunteer Handbook or any other issues or concerns, please get in touch with us.

Regards,

Scott Burke
Founder & Director
Cosmic Volunteers
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania USA

BEFORE YOU GO

Entry Requirements for Nepal

In order to enter Nepal, you must have:

- Passport valid for at least the next six months
- Visa:
 - Obtainable at the airport in Kathmandu
 - You'll need cash for visa fee (US\$50) and 2 passport-sized photos
 - Application forms will be at the airport in Kathmandu
 - Indicate that you want a "Tourist" single entry visa
 - Visas are valid for 60 days
 - Consulate information online: www.nepalembassyusa.org

Health

Nepal does not require any vaccinations in order to enter the country. However, we strongly recommend that participants consult with a travel doctor at least two months before arrival for information about immunizations and advice on how to stay healthy while traveling. You can also consult the Centers For Disease Control at www.cdc.gov/travel/destinationNepal.aspx. **Cosmic Volunteers does not provide health insurance to participants**, but we can recommend companies you can use.

Register Your Trip with your Home Government

An optional but highly recommended pre-trip step is to register your travel plans to Nepal with your home country's government. Doing this can be helpful if you lose your passport in Nepal or if there is a country-wide emergency and you need your embassy's help. You can register with your respective government online at the following websites:

USA Citizens: <https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs/ui>

UK Citizens: <http://www.britishhighcommission.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1089125546964>

Canadian Citizens: <http://www.voyage.gc.ca/main/sos/rocapage-en.asp>

Australian Citizens: <https://www.orao.dfat.gov.au/orao/weborao.nsf/homepage?Openpage>

South Africans:
[https://www.foreign.gov.za/TIBCO%20iProcess%20Client%20\(ASP\)/StaffDFA/Custom/ROSA/start.aspx](https://www.foreign.gov.za/TIBCO%20iProcess%20Client%20(ASP)/StaffDFA/Custom/ROSA/start.aspx)

Power-of-Attorney

Another optional but recommended pre-trip step is to consider creating a Power-of-Attorney document (POA) which lets you appoint someone at home to manage important financial and legal matters on your behalf while you are in Nepal. This is a particularly smart thing to do if you will be staying in Nepal for an extended period of time, say at least one month. You can create a custom POA document for \$35 USD online with Legal Zoom, which Cosmic staff uses for its POA documents while traveling. Legal Zoom's website is <http://www.legalzoom.com/power-of-attorney/power-of-attorney-overview.html>. Keep in mind that, after Legal Zoom mails you the POA, you must get the document notarized by a notary public before the document can take effect.

Photocopy Important Documents

Before you leave home, make two sets of photocopies of all important documents. Put one set of copies in your checked luggage, and leave a set of copies at home with your family/friends. Keep your original documents in your carry-on bag while you are traveling to Nepal.

Documents to Photocopy:

- Passport ID page
- Plane Ticket
- Contact information of local Coordinator
- Contact Information for Cosmic in USA
- Contact Information for family/friends at home
- Travel Insurance Policy
- Credit card(s)
- Travelers Checks (if you have them)
- Power-of-Attorney (if you have one)

Contact Information

Before you leave home, we will send you the mobile numbers of your Coordinators in Peru and the US. They will be your 24 hour contacts during your program. Please carry their contact numbers on your person (not your bags) while en-route to and in Peru.

If your flight(s) to Peru is delayed for any reason, please first call your Peru Coordinator 24 hours to let them know of the delay. If you cannot reach him/her for whatever reason, please call your US Coordinator 24 hours.

For non-emergencies, please contact us at our regular office phone at 1-215-609-4196 or by email at team@cosmicvolunteers.org. Our office hours are Monday-Friday from 9am to 5pm EST. We monitor emails and voice mails on weekday evenings and weekends.

Carry-On Bag

- Passport
- Plane Ticket
- Contact information of local Coordinator
- Cosmic's Emergency Phone Number (EPN)
- Contact Information for Cosmic's office in USA
- Contact Information for home (family, friends)
- 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, feminine products)
- Reading materials
- Pen(s)

Tip 1: During air travel, some travelers prefer putting their passport, cash, credit cards etc. in a money pouch that is concealed under their clothes for security. We've found that it's just as safe and convenient to put your cash and credit cards in a front pants pocket, and keep your passport in a front shirt pocket.

Tip 2: While in Nepal, we always keep our passports in a sealable plastic baggie (the kind used for sandwiches). This protects the passport from moisture in the hot climate where your passport can become soggy, especially if it's in your pocket while you're traveling around the country.

Checked Baggage

Don't overdo it. pack lightly so you can travel more easily and store your bag in small places. Think in terms of a backpack, duffel bag, or moderate-sized suitcase and a day pack. Because the climate is generally hot, you can often wash clothes out and dry them overnight. Bring lots of lightweight clothes. For men and women, it is better to dress conservatively.

Clothing:

- 3-4 pairs khaki pants
- 1-2 pairs of jeans (but jeans can be hot)
- 5-7 short-sleeved tops/t-shirts
- 2-3 long-sleeved shirts/tops
- Undergarments
- Sturdy sneakers or shoes
- Sandals or flip-flops
- Cotton socks
- Sleepwear

- Light jacket or windbreaker

Health and Hygiene:

- Handiwipes and anti-bacterial hand lotion
- Over-the-counter medications for pain relief, fever, diarrhea
- Toiletries (soap, shampoo, toothbrush etc)
- Lightweight, quick-dry towel (bathing)

Miscellaneous:

- Notebooks, pens, paper
- Glasses, contacts/solution - and bring a copy of your prescription
- Small travel pack/day pack

Street Smarts

- Greetings: Nepalis greet each other (and foreigners) by pressing their palms together in a prayer-like gesture and saying “Namaste”. Your greeting should be the same back to the other person.
- When answering your question, Nepalis indicate “Yes” by moving their head side to side in a rolling motion.
- People who receive gifts usually will not open the gift in front of the giver. This is in case the gift is meager, so that the giver isn’t embarrassed.
- Always ask permission to enter a temple.
- Do not eat from other people's plate and or drink from the others’ bottles.
- Hand Etiquette:
 - Always use right hand (never the left) 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.
 - It is rude to point – whether at a person/object .
- Foot Etiquette:
 - Remove your shoes before entering any home or temple/shrine.
 - Never touch anything with your feet. It’s “unclean” to Nepalis.
 - Never step over the legs of someone sitting in the on the floor.
- Walking around temples or stupas is traditionally done clockwise.
- The sight of men holding hands as friends (not lovers) is common.
- Public affection between 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.

WHEN YOU ARRIVE IN NEPAL

Note: Your actual schedule for the first few days may be somewhat different from the one described below – depending on factors such as the day/time you arrive, the location of your host family, and/or the nature of the program itself.

Day 1

When your plane lands in Kathmandu, you will be directed to the Immigration counters, so have your passport and disembarkation card ready as you get in line to have your passport stamped. Just follow your fellow passengers and you'll easily find the counter.

If you are obtaining your visa at the airport: Find the counter with the visa forms. Fill out the form, then turn it in to the immigration officer, along with your passport, visa fee in case, and passport photographs. The length of the wait to get the visa could be anywhere from 5 minutes to over an hour, depending on where you are in line and the number of immigration staff. Remember: be patient and do not show frustration with the staff, because it will only lengthen the process.

After you have your visa and passport stamped by immigration, you'll go to the baggage area and find your bags. There, we recommend that you exchange a small amount of your home currency for Nepalese Rupee (NPR) at the currency-exchange counter, equivalent to say US\$ 50. It is always a good idea to have at least some local currency with you when you enter any country.

You will then walk toward passed Customs and out of the airport's passenger exit door. Our Program Coordinator will meet you there. He will be holding a sign with your name on it. Our Program Coordinator will take you to your accommodations for the first night.

There might be an usual situation (i.e., a late or switched flight) where you do not meet our Program Coordinator at the airport. In this situation, speak to an airport representative and ask for help in making a telephone call to our Program Coordinator in Kathmandu, Nepal. If you still cannot reach the Program Coordinator in Kathmandu, call your Coordinator in Nepal first. If you cannot reach him/her, call your US Coordinator 24 hours. We may direct you to hire a taxi to take you to a hotel for the night (Cosmic Volunteers will reimburse you for the taxi and hotel). Note that all airport personnel and most taxi drivers speak English, so there should not be any language barrier.

Day 2

The Program Coordinator will give you a one-day introduction to Kathmandu, by taking you to some of the more popular tourist sites and giving you detailed information on living and working in this new culture. Depending on the timing, you will visit a Nepalese restaurant, learn how to take a bus and taxi, visit markets, and generally get your first real experience of the streets and culture of Kathmandu. If you are going to be living in a rural area and you want to buy a mobile phone, today is probably the best day to do that. Finally today, the Program Coordinator will travel with you to your host family and introduce you to everyone.

*Ground transportation to and from the airport to the program site is included in the program fee. If you want to use private transport (such as a taxi) for long-distance, city-to-city travel, you are responsible for those costs. The participant is also responsible for the costs of daily transport from the accommodation to the program site.

Day 3

Our Program Coordinator will accompany you to the organization where you will volunteer. You will meet with your Program Supervisors for the first time, to begin mapping out your duties and the host organization's expectations for your program. The Program Supervisor will review the duties and responsibilities of the job, and allow you to meet some of the beneficiaries of the program, e.g., school children.

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 (five hours behind Nepal), it will take you about five 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

WHILE IN NEPAL

Staying Healthy and Safe

The top causes of injury and death for travelers abroad are road accidents and drowning. This comes as a surprise to many, because the media tends to focus on terrorism, political strife, and infectious diseases as the most likely dangers for travelers abroad.

If you become ill or injured in Nepal, please seek medical treatment immediately. Then as soon as possible, inform your host family and local Program Coordinator. They will contact our staff in the US so that we can assist in any way we can, such as notifying your family back home.

There are both government and private health facilities near all of our volunteer areas, with emergency and outpatient care available. There are also pharmacies (“drugstores”) throughout the country where you can buy medications. A doctor’s prescription is often required.

Food and Water

Traveler’s Diarrhea is the most common illness suffered by travelers to Nepal. It’s usually caused by bacteria in the food or water you consume, and usually occurs within the first week of travel. You must be extra cautious about food and water.

Some very important tips:

- Do not drink tap water at any time in Nepal
- Do not consume ice cubes
- Drink only bottled water, boiled water, or carbonated drinks in bottles/cans
- Wash your hands often with soap and water
- Avoid restaurants that look dirty
- Avoid food from street vendors
- Avoid raw fruits and vegetables unless you peel them
- Brush your teeth using only bottled water
- Stay hydrated (see “Hot Climate”)

Toilets

There are few “western” toilets in Nepal. Instead, they mostly use “eastern” toilets which consist of a small outhouse-style shed with a hole in the ground. Sometimes it has a porcelain hole in the ground. The goal is to squat over the hole and do your business.

There is normally no toilet paper. 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!

Climate

Nepal's weather is generally predictable and pleasant. There are four climatic seasons: March to May (spring), June to August (summer), September to November (autumn) and December to February (winter). The monsoon is approximately from the end of June to the middle of September. About 80 per cent of the rain falls during that period, so the remainder of the year is dry. The Kathmandu Valley, at an altitude of 1310m (4297ft), has a mild climate, ranging from 19-27°C (67-81°F) in summer, and 2-20°C (36-68°F) in winter.

Transportation

- Ground travel in Nepal is very dangerous, due to very bad roads and careless drivers.
- Do not travel overnight on any vehicle, whether public or personal.
- For travel between cities, the safest option is to ride on a government bus.
- Use a “Tempo”, a metered 3-wheel scooters, which work out slightly cheaper than taxis.
- You must agree on a price before getting in a taxi, or you will get ripped off even more.
- Do not walk late at night (say after 9 pm), especially alone.
- Always inform your host family and Program Coordinator when making travel plans.

Living With Your Host Family

One of the most rewarding, challenging, and meaningful experiences of your time in Nepal is likely to be the time you spend living with your host family. You are encouraged to cultivate the habit of listening and observing, rather than merely hearing and seeing. Be sensitive to the feelings of others and enjoy the company of people with different life experiences! Here are few more tips to help you prepare for your Nepalese living experience.

- One of the best ice-breakers with host families is to share with them photos from home – of you, your family, school office, neighborhood, pets, city, etc. Many Nepalese are interested in foreigners' lives, so we would encourage you to share pictures and stories of your life at home.
- Our host families will treat you as another member of the family, which means you will pick up after yourself, keep your area neat, and help out with the cooking and cleaning when appropriate.
- Many Nepalese families have several generations living in the same household. Children in Nepal, like children anywhere, can be both adorable and a handful, so try to maintain your patience with them in order to integrate smoothly in the household.
- Please advise your family before you invite anyone to the house. Your family will really appreciate your courtesy.
- If you make plans to go out for an evening, please advise your family and make arrangements to get home and back into the house. They may express some worry

- that you're going out at night. Try not to be offended, they are just concerned about your safety. They will likewise encourage you to go out with family members, coworkers, or friends, so that you are not out alone at night.
- If you make plans to travel out of town, please let your family know where and for how long. If possible, give them a contact name, address, and phone number.
 - Keep items of value, such as cameras, cash, and passport locked in your luggage.
 - You will use your own toiletries and towels.
 - Try to learn at least a few words of your host family's first language – whether Nepali, Maithali, Bhojpuri, Tharu, Tamang or one of the other languages in Nepal. Your family will absolutely love to help you learn and practice, especially the children. Don't feel shy – they will totally appreciate your willingness to learn and speak their language.
 - Laundry is often done by hand in Nepal. It is usually done by the women of the household, but your offer to help will most likely be welcomed by your host family.

Saving the World

It is admirable that you want to have a positive impact on people's lives in Nepal. After all, that should be why you signed up to volunteer in Nepal, and that is why Cosmic sends volunteers there.

But please understand: **You will not “save the world” during your trip to Nepal.** Or on any trip abroad, for that matter. If you even have the phrase “save the world” in your vocabulary, you are in for a rude awakening in Nepal and your stay will be filled with major disappointment and disillusionment.

A typical pattern of some foreign volunteers is to show up in the local community, see an endless number of problems to be solved, start to make elaborate plans to solve those problems, work feverishly on executing those plans – then, ultimately experience a great deal of frustration when they realize that they have taken on too much, too quickly. Neophytes to traveling abroad can feel this even more intensely.

Our advice for your is to “work small.” As Chinese Buddhism says, “The sage does not attempt anything big.” Focus your efforts in Nepal on one person, one project at a time, because those small successes lead to big accomplishments **over time**.

For example, if you are at an orphanage, simply focus on giving the children your time, your caring, and love. Yes the orphanage might need a new roof, or more books, or even medicines for the children – and you can help out with those projects if you wish; but focus first on the kids and making them feel loved.

Money

The Rupee is the legal currency of Nepal. You should bring cash, an ATM card, travelers checks, and a credit card. You can exchange foreign currency for Rupees at the airport as well as at banks and private money-changers. There are ATM's in Kathmandu where you can withdraw cash in Rupees. You can also have money wired to you using Moneygram (www.moneygram.com) or Western Union (www.westernunion.com). For spending money, you can get by on as little as \$100 per month. You'll spend it on things like entertainment, sodas, books, gifts, newspapers, public transportation, etc. You should never carry a lot of cash or your passport on public transportation. If you must do so, use a waist-style money-belt or a safety pocket in your pants. Some travelers even put money inside their socks/shoes.

News

There are over 8 major newspapers in Nepal, the following are offered in English; the BigNepal, The Himalayan Times, The Kantipur National Daily and the Rising Nepal.

Family and Friends Calling You from Home

Your folks back home will be able to call you either at your host family or on your mobile phone. They can use their landline phone to direct dial your Nepal number. However unless they have an “international” phone service plan, direct-dialing can get very expensive. We recommend instead that they buy prepaid phone cards from a company like Nobelcom. Another option – one that we recommend – is for them to call you using an Internet phone service like Skype or Yahoo. The connections are much clearer this way, and it's usually slightly cheaper than calling from landline phones.

Email

This is widely available in Kathmandu in Internet cafes, especially in or near the cities. Please consider creating a new email address (like Yahoo or Hotmail) to be used only during your trip. The reason is security - since you'll be using public computers during your stay, you don't want anyone gaining access to your true personal email account. This may sound a bit paranoid, but it does happen to international travelers.

TelephonePhone Communication

Calls are often interrupted by bad weather, local technicalities, or overloaded circuits. Often lines are cut in the middle of a call. Please make sure you friends and families are aware of this. In case of an emergency, your parents can call the Program Coordinator and leave a message for you.

Land Lines

You can make long distance calls at a telecommunications office, Internet cafe, or through the operator. There are direct numbers to call AT&T, Sprint, and MCI to make calling card or collect calls to the US or any other country. Please do not make long distance calls from your family's or organization's phones.

Mobile Phones

Nepal has mobile phone service available. You can buy a phone and service plan when you arrive in Nepal. Or you can bring your own mobile phone to Nepal – to get service in Nepal, you can buy a chip in Nepal for around \$20 (price depends on service provider).

Parcels/Letters

You can also send and receive parcels and letters via the post office – please see the mailing address in the Contact Information section. Parcels/letters usually take 10-14 days to reach Nepal. When sending parcels/letters from Nepal, do not use Nepal's postal system – use an international carrier instead like DHL or UPS because it's safer. Also, take the parcel to the office unsealed, as the customs officer may want to inspect the contents.

AND FINALLY . . .

The following was written by a seasoned world traveler and friend of Cosmic Volunteers. The advice for volunteers is inspiring. Take a look...

Make the most of every moment. Explore side streets. Take miracle walks. Perform random acts of kindness: buy fruit and share it, give flowers, pass out pens, coins and other useful and interesting things. Say hello. Smile. Take pictures. Share them. Learn about the depth of poverty. Count your blessings. Refuse to take things for granted. Give presents carefully. Play with everything. Share your toys. Blow bubbles. Spread laughter. Be kind to animals. Offer to help. Clean up your own mess without being asked. Clean up someone else's mess too. Ask questions. Answer questions. Collect addresses of people you meet. Send them postcards and email from home. Be aware that you are foreign and exotic. Hold babies. Giggle with children. Listen to old people. Be brave. Invite a dangerous stranger to dinner. Pay the bill. Learn to say thank you in the local language. Sing out loud, songs you sang as a child and songs children will teach you. Try something totally new. Don't just sight-see, sight-think. Donate energy. Spend time. Give hugs. Be thoughtful about donating, spending, and giving money. Support good work done by local people, buy a man a bike, pay a child's school tuition, offer a mother seed money and supplies to start a small business out of her home. Teach. Learn. Explore your own cultural perspective. Be subjectively aware. Touch the world. Allow the world to touch you. Come home safely . . . And remember, a true gift of seeing the world is to return where you started and see your place for the first time.