



NEPAL



NEW EXPERIENCES, PEOPLE, ADVENTURES, LEARNING

圖：Gino 張凱鈞、Peggy 李沛頌 // 文：Peggy 李沛頌



JOINING THE NCHU IVC

Joining the National Chung Hsing University International Volunteering Club (NCHU IVC) to go volunteering in Nepal is without a doubt one of the craziest, most impulsive things I've ever done.

I initially signed up for just two reasons: 1) to volunteer, and 2) to experience other cultures.

I did not think it through, did not do much research, and didn't even scroll through IVC's social media, but now, looking back, I've come to see that this spontaneity is the best decision I've made in a very long time.

This club has one of the most respectful, passionate, and caring environments I've ever experienced in a school, and everyone there are genuinely so kind and talented. It's such a pleasure to be around them, and much to my surprise (I never thought I'd be this committed to a school club!), I found myself looking forward to our club meetings every week.

PLANNING & PREPPING 4 NEPAL

DAILY COMMUTES:
HSINCHU ↔ TAICHUNG

After weeks of discussion and drafting teaching plans (also attended two YMCA volunteer trainings), it was finally the week before our embarkment. During that week, we met every day at school, intensively making preparations, buying necessary supplies, and packing up the stationary we were going to gift the schools in Nepal. As we spent more time together, we not only became friends, but also learned how to collaborate with each other more effectively.



PRE-TRAVEL NERVES

HOW MUCH STUFF IS TOO MUCH STUFF?

WHEN IN DOUBT, BRING 'EM ALL!

Things are starting to feel real.
And I'm starting to feel like I'm not going to survive this (figuratively).

The more I researched Nepal and Rajbiraj (the place that we were going to), the more anxious I felt. A city girl through and through, outside of Taiwan, I've never been to anywhere that is not considered a modern city. I don't do outdoor sports. I'm not physically fit or strong. I've never gone camping before. I'm extremely afraid of insects and spiders. I don't have a high heat tolerance. And truth be told, I'm a neat-freak and germaphobe to a certain extent.

Even after I completely filled up my 65-liter backpack to the brim, I still felt strangely vulnerable and horrifyingly underprepared, like I know I'm missing something important. Knowing I'm going with experienced YMCA leaders and my amazing teammates from school definitely helped reduce the anxiety, but it wasn't enough to block out the creeping self-doubt getting louder and louder at the back of my mind.



TOUCHED DOWN IN NEPAL

TPE → BKK → KTM

Things just got real.

The second I stepped off the plane and saw the big "Tribhuvan International Airport" sign blinking at me, the realization that I was actually in Nepal – *THE* Nepal, from all those BBC pictures and videos – hit me. After nearly ten hours of travel... we made it!

The airport was much smaller and more dimly-lit than I had expected, and the security checks were the strictest ones I've ever been through. At this point, the excitement of arriving had worn off, and in it's place was exhaustion.

Thankfully, our local guide/coordinator Mohammed was right outside the exit to welcome us, and our bus was also ready. We soon arrived at our hostel.





EN ROUTE TO RAJBIRAJ

ETA: IN 8 HOURS, ATA: 13 HOURS
HEY, AT LEAST WE SURVIVED.

To put it simply, it was rough.

The most accurate way to describe it would be the “Indiana Jones Adventure: Temple of the Crystal Skull” ride at Tokyo DisneySea theme park.

Winding, narrow paths by the edge of the mountains; craterous, rocky dirt roads that sent dust flying in all directions; jam-packed streets with scooters dancing their way through traffic... regardless of how dangerous and unmaneuverable the way seemed, our bus tilted and bounced and honked it’s way through, carrying us safely to Rajbiraj Municipality (राजविराज).

Throughout the trip, I was absolutely terrified and carsick (nothing a pill can’t fix!), but it would be a lie to say I didn’t enjoy it.

It wasn’t comfortable, but it was fun, it was chaotic, and it was exhilarating.

It was an adventure.



THE HOMESTAY EXP.

@ RAJBIRAJ WITH AUNTIE

I was very fortunate to have Jo as a roommate, and the two of us shared a room in our host family’s home for 10 days. It was a big blue house next to the pink main house (the house that hosted 8 ppl from our group), and only Auntie and her husband lived there.

Both Auntie and her husband do not speak any English, so our interactions were limited and conducted mostly through body language and occasionally Google translate, but we could tell that they enjoyed our presence. During meal times, Auntie’s nephew would come over and keep us company, translate for us, and tell us about the food on our plates and how the family Masterchef Auntie prepared it.

FOOD

I was “suffering” from too much love.

Auntie couldn’t stop stuffing Jo and I with way too much food every single meal, and no matter how we expressed that we’re already full, no matter how many times we politely declined, she kept refilling our plates. Her nephew told us it’s the Nepali way of showing love and affection, but after a while, meal times started to become slightly stressful, as we had to constantly wrack our brains to come up with new reasons and different ways to push away the food without hurting Auntie’s feelings or seem rude.

Auntie prepared hot cups of chai (milk tea) for us every morning, and for breakfast, she usually made instant noodles or pasta. For lunch and dinner, Auntie always cooked traditional Nepali dishes, and we'd always have roti, rice, or puri (oil-fried roti), with meat curry, dal, and pickles on the side. Cucumbers were present at every meal too. The food was very good (a bit too strong and spicy for my Taiwanese tastebuds, but good), and Auntie really is a master chef. She takes great pride in her cooking, and even though she couldn't understand our compliments, she always lightened up when she saw us enjoying her food.



A major culture shock to us is that husband and wife are not allowed to dine at the same table, at the same time. The males have to eat first, and females can only start after they're done, despite them being the ones that prepared the meal. There's also a pecking order, so the eldest members get to eat first.

As guests, Jo and I always got to eat first, and we always got to eat at the table, but only in our final days there did we manage to get Auntie to join us for dinner (her husband had already started eating, but a win's a win!). I understand that this is their culture, and I respect it, but it's still a bit sad and upsetting to see.

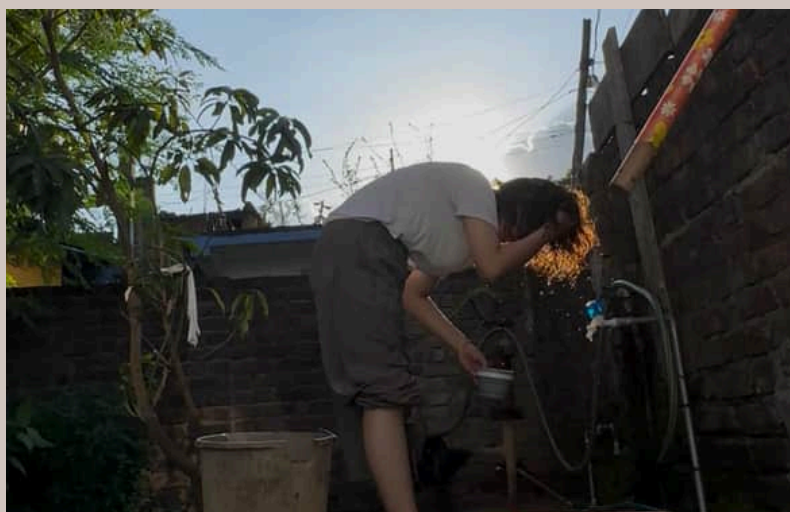
ROOM

It's a decent-sized room painted pink, and there was a mosquito net over the bed. We didn't have and didn't need any blankets, because in Rajbiraj's heat, the room gets incredibly hot and stuffy. The fan on the ceiling and the windows (that don't get much breeze) made it just about bearable to fall asleep at night.

It's quite nice actually, once you get used to the heat. We have enough privacy, have enough space, it's quiet, and I was really at peace. Though the bed is quite hard, lying on the it after a long, tiring day feels absolutely amazing.

BATHING

This was another culture shock for me. The people there didn't shower daily, and most families there only used a tap and a bucket to shower. Honestly, I'm not sure why I'm surprised, because I didn't expect to see a shower head, but I didn't think it'd be this either. Our host families are all pretty well off and at the top of the caste system, so I was surprised to see that they didn't at least have a lightbulb or a rubber pipe in the shower room. The water was groundwater, and sometimes the smell starts getting strong around late afternoon, but other times, it wasn't too dirty, and taking a cool shower in the blistering Nepali heat was a bliss.



Jo and I couldn't shower at Auntie's place (we had to go to the main house), because her shower place wasn't a room — it was outdoors in the backyard, next to where she did her dishes. There was only a short wall bordering the road outside, and there were also windows in the house looking into the yard. Aside from that, I tried washing my hair there once, and I was pleasantly surprised. It was a much better shower experience than the main house's. Showering in the open air instead of a small dingy room, using Auntie's clear and lukewarm water, with sunlight glistening off the spraying tap, it was really enjoyable.

VOLUNTEERING AT THE RAJBIRAJ LOCAL SCHOOLS

SHREE RAJDEVI THAKODEVI
JOGENDRA BHAGAT SECONDARY
SCHOOL & BADIYAL BASIC SCHOOL

TEACHING

We were divided into three groups (4 people per group), and each group taught a class together (6 types of lessons prepared per group). My group originally planned to have a lot of fun discussion and handicraft courses for the students, but what we failed to consider is their English proficiency. When we started teaching the first day, we realized that most of the students, even the teachers, have a very limited understanding of English. Our classes were designed to be versatile enough so that they can be suitable for students of different ages, but even the simpler classes were difficult to carry out due to the language barrier. The first few classes were very challenging.



We adjusted our teaching plans, made sure to have pre-made examples ready, and demonstrated each step extra clearly with exaggerated movements, so even if they can't understand us, they could still follow what we're doing. We also simplified the harder classes, either by starting on their DIY projects for them, or by separating them into groups and doing a group-by-group demonstration.

Another challenge we faced was that it was very hard to keep the order in class, partially due to the language barrier, but also because the students were a bit too excited to meet us. At times, it would get so loud that it'd be impossible to talk over them, thus making it hard to regain control over the classroom. We experimented with establishing attention signals/classroom chants (like "Attention! One two!" and "Eyes on me. Eyes on you!" that kind of thing), and though at first they couldn't really get what we're doing, after a while they eventually did, and it worked quite well.

With these adjustments, the following classes went much more smoothly, and we like to believe they enjoyed their time with us.



ACTIVITY FAIR

This was where each of us would host simple but fun games, and the students had to complete each one and collect all of our signatures. Once they do so, they got to claim a prize — the stationary packages we brought and packed for them!

The activity fair was held outdoors, under the baking sun, so around 1.5 hours in, we had to end the fair or we'd get heatstroke. We then gathered up everyone, and handed out their completion prizes. Though the games were simple and non-competitive, the students were even more invested than I expected, and they didn't want to let us end the games.



RE-PAINTING THE WALLS

Aside from just teaching and preparing fun activities, we also helped a school repaint and clean up some of its classrooms and hallways. Though the paint wasn't thick enough because it was base paint, i thought it was a very rewarding experience.



REFLECTIONS

This experience opened my eyes in many ways.

1. I realized how lucky I am to be able to take all of my life's comforts for granted.

I'm thankful for my family and my environment for providing me with a comfortable life and everything I need. I never saw the paved roads and clean streets, the clear water, and the stable electricity as luxuries, but now I finally understand that, to a lot of people in the world, it is. And I've experienced it. It's a bad thing, I know, to not feel like it's a serious issue, or at least one that's pressing as long as it doesn't concern me, and I'm not saying i feel this way or agree with this feeling, but before Nepal, I don't think I really understood or accurately imagined what it meant to live without these things that I considered a necessity. I now appreciate everything I have even more, and I don't think I'll ever forget my 9 days living at Rajbiraj.

2. I'm reminded of how much I still need to learn.

I've stayed in my comfort zone for way too long, so it's been a while since I last needed someone's help. At times, it's easy to forget that you can't do everything by yourself and that it's normal to be bad at something.

On this journey, I sure needed a lot of help, and I sure was bad at a lot of things.

I wasn't the best teacher to the students, I couldn't carry most of the heavier baggage, I wasn't effective at picking up trash or painting walls, and I was so drained by the end of each day that I couldn't even muster up the energy to socialize anymore.

Yet the other members in our team completed all of these seemingly with ease, at least compared to me. They were always so upbeat, never seemed to struggle as much as I did, and were even able to take care of other teammates and volunteer their assistance. This feeling of physical and emotional struggle was foreign and kind of unpleasant to me, so despite a part of me kept telling myself that it's progress because it means I'm pushing my limits, it still took me a while to process everything.

Much respect to everyone!

They are some of the coolest, kindest, most competent, hard-working, and supportive people I know.

3. I think I'm starting to understand that happiness doesn't have to be material. It's the simple, pure moments in life.

I love my creature comforts, and I think my surroundings do, too. We often associate happiness with shopping, getting what we want, wealth, indulging in good food, enjoying materialistic comforts, et cetera, but in Nepal, I've observed the kids being equally happy without them. Their happiness is no less real nor less than mine, and yet they have considerably less comfort and less material. Something so simple as a game of "red light, green light" can keep them entertained for half an hour, and dancing along to "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes" can get the teachers so invested that they start dancing with the students.

Perhaps it's because I haven't met a lot of kids, but in Taiwan, I don't think I've ever seen that kind of joy before, and I'm not sure if I can find it.

4. Nepal's beauty.

Nepal's natural scenery is stunning, from bright green fields stretching on and on without an end in sight, to the snow-capped mountains looming in the distance, their peaks lost in the clouds. It's cultural and religious heritage sites are just as majestic, instilling reverence in all visitors and pilgrims alike, leaving me awestruck at each square, stupa, and shrine.

But another beauty, is its culture. It's the people.

In a country that is literally known for its wonders and beauty, the people's hospitality, their kindness, their friendliness, and their sense of community is one of the most remarkably beautiful things about Nepal.

These are memories I will forever hold dear, and hope to never forget.

