

The Namo Buddha Monastery is one of the three most important pilgrimage sites in Nepal. The gold covered roof of the monastery sparkled in the dawn light. The Himalayas hid in the clouds on the horizon. I could sense the presence of a restful spirit throughout the complex. It was the perfect place to kick off my Nepal adventure.



Service above self is the motto of Rotary International. For the 1.2 million Rotarians around the world this motto is a call to action. Each of the 45,000 local Rotary clubs identify needs and build programs to create lasting change. Oftentimes, clubs will cooperate in a joint venture to tackle larger problems. The Tripureswor Rotary Club of Nepal and the Bozeman Sunrise Rotary Club of Montana joined forces to address shortcomings in six public schools in Nepal.

The schools faced several challenges. High dropout rates, low attendance by girls, limited support for teacher education, and lack of technology were identified as key contributors to the low test scores and declining attendance. Three years ago, the two Rotary clubs developed a multi-year program and secured funding to address these concerns. A group of Bozeman Rotarians visits these schools each year to monitor progress. In November, I was part of the group to make the final tour of the schools in the program.



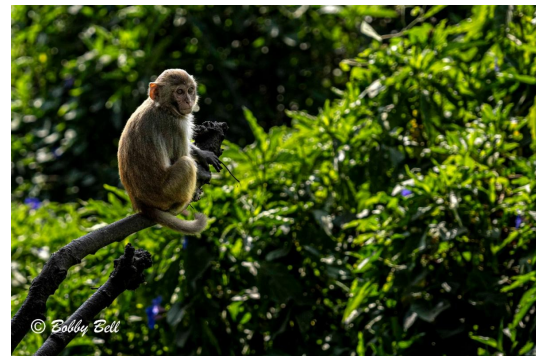
Nepal, a landlocked country in South Asia, is nestled in the Himalayas between India and China. Its roughly trapezoidal shape is about the size of the state of New York. Renowned for its dramatic landscapes, it is home to eight of the world's ten tallest mountains,

including Mount Everest, the highest peak on Earth. The country's diverse geography ranges from the flat plains in the south to the rugged Himalayan terrain in the north.



Summitting Mount Everest is an arduous three-month effort beginning in March. The travel to Base Camp starts with a short flight from Kathmandu, followed by a twelve-day trek. Several weeks of climbing to each of the next 4 camps positions one for the final single day push to the summit. Much of the time in these camps is used for acclimatization to the altitude changes. We opted for a more relaxed scenic flight to view this top of the world. As we cleared the low-lying cloud cover the majestic Himalayan Mountain range came into view. After passing Mount Everest, the plane turned around so that passengers on the other side could see the mountains. This was a very pleasant way to view the massive range.

The history of Nepal is a tapestry of ancient civilizations, monarchies, and cultural synthesis. Historically, the Kathmandu Valley was a center for trade and cultural exchange between India and Tibet. The unification of Nepal was achieved in the late 18th century under King Prithvi Narayan Shah. For much of its history, Nepal was an absolute monarchy, transitioning to a constitutional monarchy in the 1990s and eventually to a federal democratic republic in 2008 following a decade-long bloody civil war.



Religion plays a vital role in Nepalese society, with Hinduism being the predominant faith, followed by Buddhism. The two religions coexist harmoniously, sharing many rituals and sacred sites, such as the Pashupatinath Temple and Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha. We climbed the 800 steps to the top of the Swayambhu Nath Stupa in the Kathmandu valley. It is often referred to as the Monkey Temple as there are hundreds of wild monkeys climbing the trees and pestering the visitors for handouts.

The caste system, deeply rooted in Hindu tradition, continues to influence social hierarchy, though efforts have been made to reduce its discriminatory practices through legal reforms. Education plays a major role in the effort to break down these cultural barriers.



Nepal's population, estimated at around 30 million, is a mosaic of ethnic groups, languages, and cultures. Nepali, derived from the Indo-Aryan language family, is the official language. More than 120 regional languages and dialects enrich the country's linguistic heritage. Despite challenges of poverty and underdevelopment, Nepal's vibrant culture, natural beauty, and resilience of its people make it a unique and captivating nation.

The Schools





At each school we were greeted with warm smiles, vertically joined palms accompanied by the Sanskrit greeting namaste (nah-mas-tay) or welcome. The greeter placed a garland of marigolds and a silk prayer shawl around our necks. This traditional greeting for a guest in Nepal represents the conventional Hindu-Buddhist ideology of treating visitors with the same reverence as a god. We certainly felt special.



Each visit began with a general assembly of the students and welcoming remarks from the school's principal. Traditional dance performances by some of the students capped the opening ceremonies. We toured classrooms and were able to observe firsthand the effect of the teacher training and the enthusiastic use of the computers and science lab equipment supplied through our grant.





We were briefed on the success of each element of our grant. One of our schools moved from 13th place (out of 14 district schools) to 6th place as measured by the Nepali Secondary Education Exam. Teacher training and parent engagement were credited for much of the success. The computer labs at each school were a huge hit with the students.

The three-year grant expires in March 2025. We committed to creating another grant with the Tripureswor Rotary. We expect to add new schools as well as include a few of the current schools involved in this grant. Our Rotary hosts graciously treated us to several dinners and celebrations during our visit.

Project Animal Aid

I've supported [Project Animal Aid](#) in Boulder, Colorado, for a number of years. This organization collects veterinary equipment, technology and supplies no longer needed from veterinarians, hospitals, supply manufacturers and other sources. These donated items are then sent worldwide to veterinarians working in non-profit or non-governmental organizations devoted to animal health. When they learned of my trip to Nepal they asked if I would act as a courier and deliver a bag of supplies to Sneha's Care in Kathmandu.

Of course, I agreed and soon received a large duffel bag full of bandages, splints, surgical attire, syringes, medicine, sterile supplies and countless other small items. I met Sneha Shrestha the day after my arrival in Kathmandu at her facility on the outskirts of the city. She was overjoyed with the duffel bag of supplies and told me stories of previous shipments that had been confiscated by customs for out-of-date medicine.

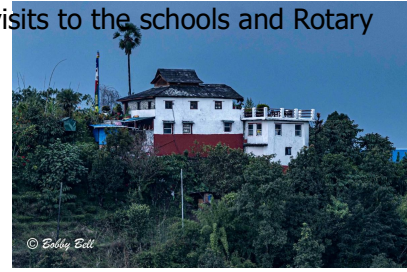
We toured her facility housing more than 170 dogs, cows, sheep, pigs, goats and several water buffalo. Sneha told me that she founded the organization in 2015 after finding a partially paralyzed dog on the street. Her mission is to safeguard animals from any sort of mistreatment or cruelty. She, along with her employees, provides medical care, rescue aid, rehabilitation and dog population management services.



[Sneha's Care](#)

They provide neutering services free of charge for thousands of pets a year in the community. As we entered the compound it seemed as if every animal wanted a hug or a pat on the head from Sneha. I was moved by her devotion to these animals and her organization's mission.

For most of us this was our first trip to Nepal. The official visits to the schools and Rotary functions were planned with free time to explore parts of the country. One afternoon after riding a gondola to the top of a local mountain, we hiked for several hours along the ridgeline to our hotel for the evening. We were treated to a beautiful sunset from the deck of the hotel.



The Annapurna mountains towered above us in the distance.

After we finished our tour of one school, we hiked down 2,000 feet to our bus waiting to take us back to Kathmandu.

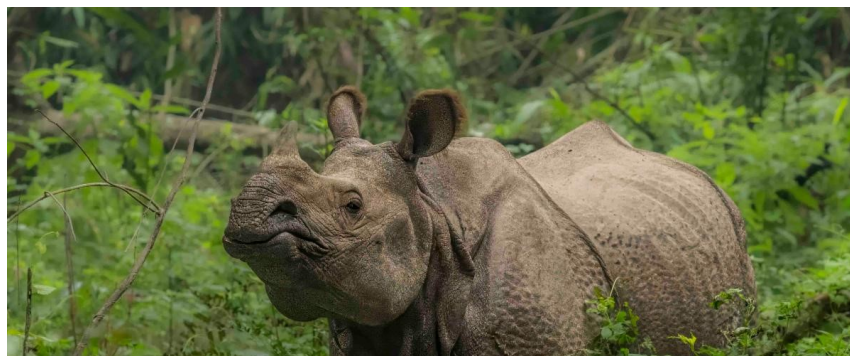




Along the way I tested a self-powered cable car over a river gorge. If you look carefully you can see me dangling about 800 feet above the river.



We planned two full days to explore Chitwan National Park. The 350 square mile park provides a protected natural habitat for One Horned Rhinoceroses, Royal Bengal Tigers, Gharial Crocodiles and 65 other species of mammals. We were teased by the many tiger footprints we followed on our early morning safaris, but no actual tigers were spotted. A crocodile swam towards us as we crossed the river in a small boat. This rhinoceros took his time checking us out before disappearing back into the bush.





The energy in Kathmandu is intoxicating. Motorbikes carrying three or four people weave through the cars and pedestrians, all crowded onto the tiny city streets. The continuous ebb and flow is done with only an occasional warning toot-toot of a horn. Shop owners politely invite you in to explore their goods. Everyone is going somewhere with a shopping bag. Religious shrines are found on every street and visited by worshippers at all times of the day.

I couldn't resist the sales pitch of a local tailor. He promised a custom-made sports jacket of my design and cloth choice in less than 3 days. He assured me that I was getting the friends and family rate. As in any successful bargaining adventure, we both felt pleased with the price. It was an offer I couldn't resist. I bought two. The jackets are amazing.

Each of the nineteen days of this trip were filled with new adventures, towering views of the top of the world, delightful food and fun with friends. Watching the children in each school actively participate in their lessons confirmed that our grant has made a huge difference in their lives. The two Rotary clubs have begun planning for the next grant.

Buddha reminds us "Each morning we are born again. What we do today is what matters most." What will you do with your gift of today?



Stay well and travel often.
Bobby

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