

A Journey to the Everest English School

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By Jessica Pellman

A trip of a lifetime ... I would be crossing the Pacific Ocean for the first time in my life, traveling with my sister Heidi and her partner Troy to stay in the remote village of Sanitar, Nepal; home of the Everest English School. At 2:45am our flight left the Vancouver airport and our journey began.

Recently, I had felt a strong urge to connect with other citizens of the world; the ones that do not experience the privileged Western life that we are so fortunate and accustomed to living. This was a perfect opportunity to make that connection. I wouldn't say I was unappreciative of my life or that I took it for granted, but I wanted to be reminded of my good fortune. I wanted to be inspired to help others, to be enlightened, humbled, and to experience a world so different from my own; I wanted to live with those people who have so little yet so much at the same time.

I had heard many of Troy's stories about Nepal, the school, and the wonderful people of Sanitar. I dreamed of similar travels. I had been looking for a life changing opportunity for a while and I would finally get the culture shock and enlightening experience that I had been searching for. Having Heidi and Troy share this experience with me not only made it more special, it also made the challenges we would face easier to overcome. In fact, I was completely unprepared for what I was about to experience. Having only done a small amount of travelling in Europe and the odd all inclusive sun vacation, I had no concept of what was waiting for me on the other side of the world in Nepal; a place that I have always wanted to visit.

We landed in Kathmandu at 11pm local time, with the city cloaked in darkness. Kathmandu operates on a dawn to dusk schedule and this was evident as we made our way through the city. The drive to our hotel was a bit eerie; the only light was cast from the few cars still on the road. We could see shadows of homes and the odd person, wild dog or cow wandering the dark, narrow streets. We arrived at our hotel and settled into our rooms. Initially, I was a bit skeptical of the cleanliness and possibility of bug infestations, however, the hotel had been recommended by Troy's friend Nilam whom he trusts. As well, there were numerous strong locks on the doors allowing me to feel safe for the night. After 32 hours of travel, I was delirious and had no idea where I was. I hoped I could get my bearings in the morning. With the door and window locked tight, total exhaustion set in and I managed to fall asleep despite the symphony of barking dogs.

I woke to the light of sunrise, the sounds of car horns, and the barking dogs which proved to be a constant in Kathmandu. The view out my window was quite tranquil – an empty overgrown lot scattered with garbage, low-rise apartment buildings, and the sun hovering above the foothills. It was the beginning of my first day in Nepal.

Stepping outside the front lobby of the hotel, chaos reigned. I had never seen anything like it. Even my short time in Tijuana, Mexico could not compare to the scene outside the doors of our seemingly tranquil hotel. The "roads", more narrow than Canadian city alleyways, were filled with people, cars, vans, rickshaws, motorcycles and dogs all moving in one choreographed dance. This was Tamel, and navigating the streets was both challenging and exhilarating. Troy, an old pro, led us through the crowded, narrow streets to his favorite spots. He gave us the grand tour for the next couple of days as Heidi and I became more and more familiar with navigating the labyrinth of streets and alleys. We took in the exhilarating sites, sounds and smells; the chaos was beautiful, vibrant and exhilarating, but could be draining and overwhelming at the same time. The intoxicating blend of car exhaust, garbage and fragrant incense filled the hot, humid air. Navigating the narrow, crowded streets required our undivided attention. If you weren't dodging cars, motorcycles and trekking salesmen you were making sure you didn't trip in a pothole or

stumble over a stray dog lounging in the sun. Within a couple of days we had mastered the navigation techniques. The longer we stayed in Tamel, the more familiar and at ease I began to feel. Not only were our surroundings challenging to navigate physically, they were also mentally and emotionally draining. The extreme poverty was unlike anything I have seen. It broke my heart to see the hardship the Nepalese people had to endure. Although they struggled for survival on a daily basis, above it all, they were some of the most gracious, kind, and gentle people I have had the fortune to experience. Nonetheless, after five days in Kathmandu, I was ready for the tranquility of the village. Once again, it was going to be a culture shock, but I kept an open mind and looked forward to both the challenges and the rewards that lay ahead.

The plane we traveled on to get to the village was very small. I had flown in similar planes before, but they were in slightly better shape. With Heidi white knuckled and Troy by her side, we took in the beauty of the Himalayas, seeing it for the first time since we had arrived in Nepal. Although quite far in the distance, the mountains were breathtaking, and enough to draw Heidi's attention away from the less than ideal flight conditions. I have to admit the flight made me a bit nervous especially from my vantage point where I could see daylight around the hatch from the broken seal. Still, I didn't let my fears get the best of me and focused on the destination ... until I came to the realization that we were about to land on a very short, dirt runway! When flying, I find that it's the take-offs and landings that make me most nervous.

We arrived in Rumjatar at 10 am, and the heat and humidity was already heavy. I wondered what it would be like once we started walking. After exiting through the wooden gates of the small airport, we were greeted by several smiling faces and warm welcomes. A few of the teachers and villagers had come to pick us up and help carry our bags. We stopped at the local café to have our first authentic Nepalese meal of Dahl Bhat and mutton soup. I was a bit apprehensive at first, but wanted the full experience, and I was instantly delighted by how delicious it tasted.

We emerged into the heat and began the 40 minute walk to Sanitar village. However, due to the intense heat we moved slowly, and it took us longer to reach our destination than we had hoped. We stopped along the way to say hello to curious onlookers and friends that Troy had met on previous trips.

The excitement in the village was evident as we came up the road and were led through the cornfields to the back of the school. The school was buzzing with excitement and anticipation of our arrival. We were a bit late and the children had been waiting anxiously for us to arrive. As we rounded the corner we were greeted in stereo by two long lines of children. After we were blessed with Tikka on our foreheads, scarves and flower wreaths were draped around our necks and we were led down the center of the two lines of children. Each student welcomed us to the school and filled our hands with bouquets of flowers they had spent the morning gathering. Finally, meeting the people from Troy's stories and seeing the school that he built was amazing. Experiencing the hospitality, excitement and generosity of the people of Sanitar was an overwhelming, heartwarming and touching experience – one that I will never forget.

During our time in Sanitar, we spent every day at the school and were kept wonderfully busy. We practiced English with the students and showed them pictures and locations on the map. We had brought an assortment of information from Canada and everyone was eager to learn facts about our country. Heidi and I showed photographs of polar bears, orca whales, bald eagles and caribou, and the students were so excited to see so many strange new things! Our friends never left our sides, as we always travelled in an entourage of teachers and parents who not only organized our next move, but translated upon request. We continuously compared the similarities and differences of our lives. We explored the surrounding countryside and took in the stunning natural beauty that surrounded us. Many people of the village invited us to have tea and meals at their homes, and it seemed as though our day was scheduled down to the last minute – it was wonderful. The teachers, students, and community of Sanitar showed us such amazing

hospitality. The generosity and pride that was taken in caring for us during our stay was overwhelming; the people of Sanitar immediately treated us like family.

I was inspired and amazed when I met Troy and heard about the work he was doing in Nepal and how he came about starting CanWES. So many people travel the world and vow to give back or try to make a difference. In fact, I had the same thoughts and desires myself for quite some time. But it is rare to meet someone who actually follows through on those vows, who takes on the challenges of helping the citizens of the world and tries to impact the lives of the less fortunate. It is a big job and a lifelong commitment, one that can seem very daunting; there is so much to do, so where do you start?

Many people return to our Western world after traveling and get overwhelmed with the complexities and size of the goal – how do you save the world? Others get busy with life or slowly become disconnected from the quest. Not surprisingly, Troy stuck with it; he tried, and began to make a difference. Meeting him and following his journey has inspired me to follow in his footsteps. Being invited to have this experience was an amazing opportunity to really connect to CanWES and the people that I have been learning about and supporting in my own small way for the past two years. I was able to see first hand the difference an education can make for a child, a community, the world, our environment and the planet. Through education comes awareness and through awareness comes change. Getting the opportunity to spend time with the wonderful people of Sanitar and our supporters and friends in Kathmandu has inspired me to make an effort in raising both awareness and funds to support the Everest English School and future CanWES initiatives.

I am so thankful for this experience and so grateful to my new friends from Sanitar for sharing their lives with me and welcoming me into their homes and village. Experiencing their kindness and their struggle with adversity first hand has inspired me to try and make a difference in their world. I'm not sure if they will ever realize how they have impacted my life. I will never forget the time I spent with them, it has changed me forever. It has made a significant difference in my life and has given me something that money can't buy; one day, I hope to return the favour.