

2008

TRAVEL BLOG

Stichting Helping Hands 4 Smiling Faces



First steps in India



Monday, February 25, 2008

Day 1

India, Delhi, Tibetan Refugee Camp, Tibetan Cyber Cafe

It started early, around 5.30 actually when I couldn't sleep anymore. Travel nerves, I guess. But never mind because my ride (thanks sis and hubby) arrived early as well: 6.40: I have never seen so little traffic on the road to the airport before...scary!

All though early, the airport was already fully alive. So much so that I even had to wait to get my rug sack sealed. But at the check-in there was no row at all, so there even was time to check me through to the Zurich-Delhi flight as well.

That was actually the last time there was no row that day: just for starters there was one at the passport control, one at the bank where I changed euro's for dollars and one at the gate. But that last one was made easier to endure because of a very nice phone call from my niece Lotte and nephew Tim and a little later of my friend Marijke. Thanks guys!

The only curious thing to say about the otherwise pretty uneventful flight to Zurich was that we had one real famous person on board: The coach of the Dutch National Soccer team: Marco van Basten. It was actually very funny to see lots of - mostly Dutch people - trying very hard to respect his privacy and at the same time glimpsing at him all the time.

Didn't see much of Zurich airport because I had to rush to get to my connecting flight to Delhi. But of course there was another massive row at the security checkpoint. So when I finally arrived at the gate, I was the last person to board.

It was another pretty uneventful flight, except from lots of turbulence and one real air sack over the Caspian Sea. That was really scary!

And of course at arrival in Delhi there was another cue at customs. So it took almost an hour to get through...

By that time my luggage was ready and waiting for me at baggage claim and I could walk through immediately.

My friend Lazar - whom I met last time I was in India - was waiting for me as promised. I was a real Indian welcome, complete with flowers for me! Imagine that.

After that it took a while to get to the guesthouse in the Tibetan Refugee Colony where my hostel is. Searching for it was made extra difficult by the fact there was a total blackout in that part of town. But in the end we found it, I got to my room, went to bed and fell asleep!

Something new



Tuesday, February 26, 2008

Day 2

India, Delhi, Tibetan Refugee Camp, Tibetan Cyber Cafe

So traffic in Delhi is something special. If you think traffic in Friday's rush hour in Paris is bad, think again. Traffic in Delhi is 100 times more scary.

There are many three, four and five lane roads, and signs with 'Hold to your lane' along all of them. But no one really does. Because in Delhi traffic is survival of the fittest. So they drive six, seven or eight cars in 4 lanes....they honk their horns almost constantly...they don't look before they 'change lanes'....they actually drive on the wrong side of the road if it brings them to their destination faster...

And everything is made even worse by the fact that walkers, cyclers, rickshaws, tooktooks, cars buses and big trucks all share the same road. Sounds bat? Well, it is. Come to think of it, Delhi traffic - especially in rush hour - is one long repartition of near death experiences for those in it. It is really remarkable that you don't see so many accidents happening. That says something about the nerves and survival skills of the Indian people. I just feel very lucky that my friend is a reliable driver!

Spend most of today in the Crafts museum. Like the rest of India it shows how diverse this country is. There are many really talented artists out here with incredible skills. Nice about this museum is that they not only show the arts, but also the artists making them. So it was good spending some time out there.

I also went to the Raj Ghat: this is the now sacred place where the body of Mahatma Gandhi was burned after his death in 1948. It was unbelievably busy with loads and loads of schoolchildren and a few tourists as well. And it seemed like every child wanted to talk to every tourist. 'What's your name?' 'Where are you from?' 'Do you like India?' 'What do you think of mister Gandhi?' And if I answered to their satisfaction (I am Tjitske from Holland, I love India and I think mister Gandhi is a very great man!) I would get all smiles.

The great little man is still honoured by all, and so is the site where his body was cremated. It's called Raj Ghat and there is a sense of calm, peace and serenity around that place in an otherwise crazy busy and loud Delhi.

At the end of the day I visited the Arshakdham Hindu Temple on the outskirts of Delhi. This complex has only

recently been finished and is really big. They build it in 4 years, all from donations from Hindu people all over the world.

Only one little drawback: they don't allow you to take any pictures which is understandable but still a shame because it is really beautiful. You have to take my word for it.

On the way to Lazar's house, we stop at a big open space with around 20 different statues in the middle of nowhere. This is to be a statue park for all the mainly referring to the British era-statues for with there is no more room in their original place

Finished the day having dinner at my friend Lazar's house. And again had a great night. Conversation is not easy though because none of their English is fluent. But never mind, I guess I am now very accomplished in talking with my hands...

Delhi-Kathmandu



Wednesday, February 27, 2008

Day 3

India, Delhi, Indira Gandhi International Airport, waiting room

Started early this morning with a stroll around the Tibetan Refugee Camp where my guesthouse is located. It is this little part of Delhi with of course a very Tibetan feel. Not only because of the Tibetan prayer flags you see everywhere, but also through the many monks you see walking around in their traditional deep red attire. It gives this part of town a very serene feel. With in turn is being disturbed by the ever present mobile phones: a Tibetan monk talking on a mobile somehow doesn't really make any sense. But then again, it is India the land of contrasts....

Lazar came to pick me up to bring me to the airport for my flight to Kathmandu. As I told you already Delhi traffic is something special. Today was no different. So after yet another few brushes with death-by-Delhi-traffic we arrived at the airport.

That started a day of waiting: Waiting to get in to the departure hall (My passport/ticket were checked); waiting to get my bag x-rayed and sealed (where they checked my passport/ticket again); waiting for check-in (where they checked my passport/ticket again); waiting to pass immigration (where they checked my passport/ticket again: this time I got a stamp!); waiting for boarding (where they checked my passport/ticket again); and after boarding waited again for take off, because some fellow traveller got hold up in transit....

So you can understand that by the time I get back home one more skill: I can wait with the best of them.

Flying high

The flight to Nepal is 815 km and takes 1 hour and 10 minutes. It would have been pretty uneventful normally, but it turned out to be an adventure in itself. One of the passengers - an older German man - went completely berserk after a stewardess apparently spilt some water on him. (According to his neighbours it was only a drop...) He started shouting, was very abusive and aggressive. At first it seemed funny but it really turned scary when he started fighting. In the end he had to be held by 4 grown men (staff and passengers). Never seen anything like that in my life and I hope I never will.

Because I got my Nepal visa already in Holland, I could walk straight through customs. So before I knew it I

was outside and met by this sea of Nepali men waving papers with the names of the people they are supposed to pick up. There were literally hundreds of them. To it took me a while to find the one with my name on it, but I did in the end.

The taxi drove me and a few other guests to the Kathmandu Peace Guest House, my home for the next few days.

So I got a first glimpse of Kathmandu. First impressions: it is certainly different from what I've seen so far. Its full of little streets, roads with holes in them everywhere, people living/working/eating/buying/selling everything on the side of the road. Really hard to describe. (later on I will try to put some pictures on my blog, so you can see what I mean).

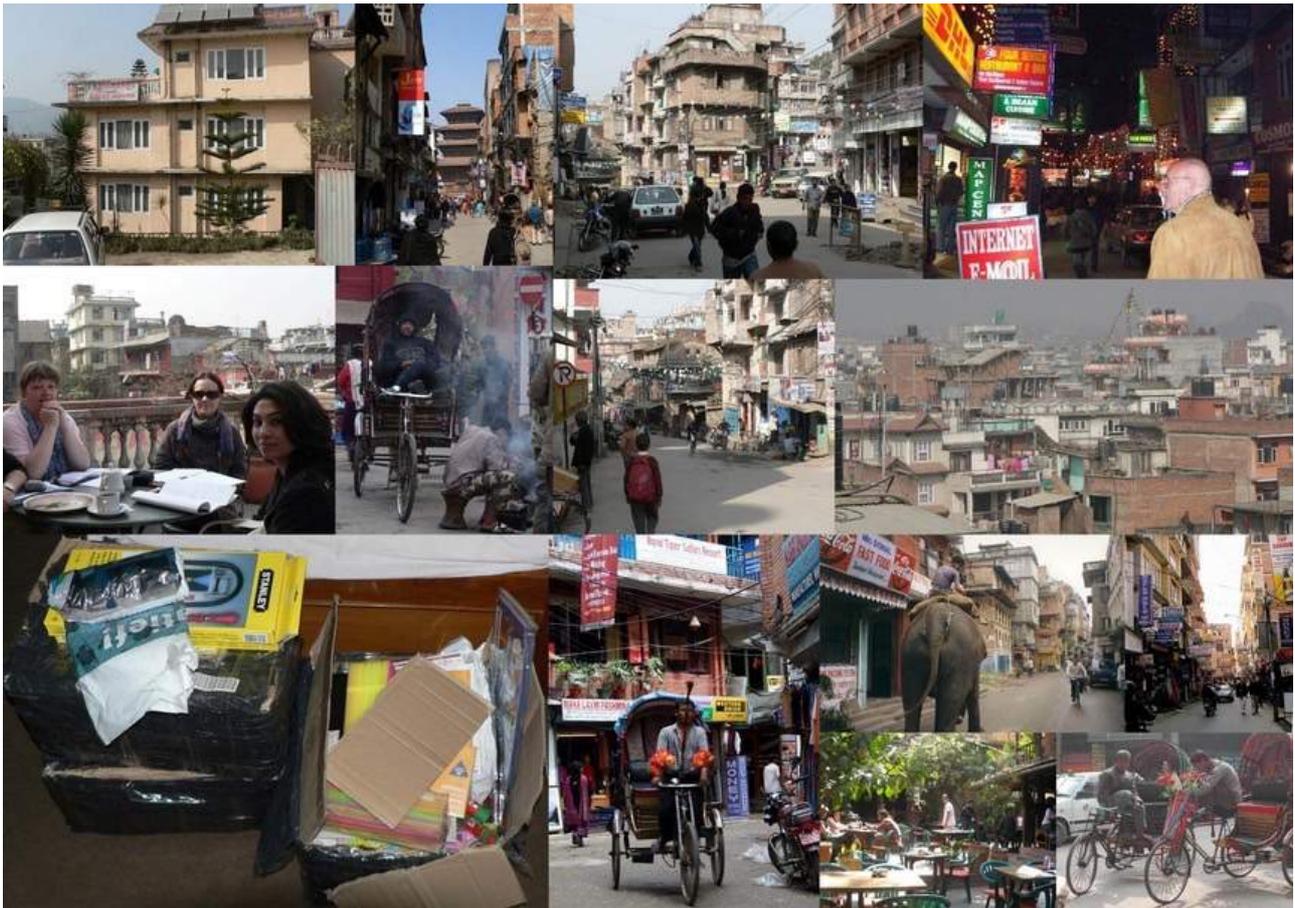
At the guesthouse I met Rabyn from Hope & Home, the guy I have been corresponding with before I came out here. Nice to put a face with the name signing those emails.

We had a little stroll around Thamel, the touristy part of Kathmandu. Pinned some money and than got back to the guesthouse to settle in.

With isn't actually as straight forward as it seems, because in Nepal every day the power is cut for a few hours to save energy. Of course they never tell you beforehand when the power is cut. So one minute you're reading in the light of an electric lamp, next thing you're complete in the dark of daily blackout. And that happened to me just as I entered my room.

But I was lucky to have my headlight on hand, so as they say: and than there was light....

Lessons



Thursday, February 28, 2008

Day 4

Nepal, Kathmandu, Thamel (KTM tourist area), a cyber cafe

So after a good night sleep I started the day eating breakfast on the rooftop terrace of the Guesthouse. My home away from home for the next few days. Great people, nice and quiet (which is a bonus in Kathmandu...) and great views!

Around ten - Nepali people don't do exact times... - I met Yuzeena: she is going to teach me some basic Nepali. A scary language that has really nothing in common with Dutch. So it is a challenge.

But according to Yuzeena I am a natural, so there is hope for me yet. I guess I am going to find out soon, because this afternoon I go out exploring on my own and practice.....

Monkey temple

Together with Sristy (one of the Hope & Home-guys) I visited the Swayambhunath temple on a hill (we Dutch would call it a mountain) on the West side of Kathmandu. It is also known as the Monkey Temple because a very big troop of little monkeys live there. There is actually a swimming pool in the temple grounds especially for the monkeys that want to escape the summertime heat.

Buddhist temples are - in my experience - always very serene places to be, and here it wasn't any different. Its quiet special being in a place like that. (Or it might be that it is so quiet there because you have to climb a 365 steps to get there: and they are really irregular as well, so very good on the knees. (kidding!!))



Gemma

Back in the guesthouse there's a knock on my door from a girl called Gemma. She is another Hope & Home volunteer. Turns out she is already working in the place I am going to as well. And that will be the Disabled Rehab Centre in a village 45 minutes by taxi from Kathmandu. So she could tell me a lot about the work, the centre and of course the children. It all sounds great. Today when she gets back, she is having a chocolate party. Look at the pics...

I'll be in for quiet a challenge, but in a good way. But I will tell you all about that later when I've seen things for myself

The day ends with a real Hope & Home gathering, first on a balcony and later on in a restaurant in town. We are joined there by Tammy and David, also volunteers from Hope & Home. Great evening!

Meeting the stupa



Friday, February 29, 2008

Day 5

Nepal, Kathmandu, Thamel (KTM tourist area), a cyber cafe

The day start where the previous stopped: with yet another bunch of H&H volunteers.

After breakfast I have my second Nepali lesson. It is not an easy language to learn, but I am getting there. I hope...the proof of the pudding is of course in the eating.

In the afternoon we all went to one of the many travel agents to book an outing. We are all going to Chitwan for a jungle tour complete with and elephant ride, a visit to an elephant breeding centre and actually bathing the elephant. And all of this in a three day trip for the grand price of 70 US dollar per person...

The rest of the bunch are going on trekking after that, but I don't want to leave the DRC-children for that long. I did come here to work with them after all.

At the end of the day Sristy took me sightseeing. This time we went to Boudhanath Stoepea one of the world's largest outside of Tibet... It was very impressive! I felt like being in Tibet...

Pashupathinath temple

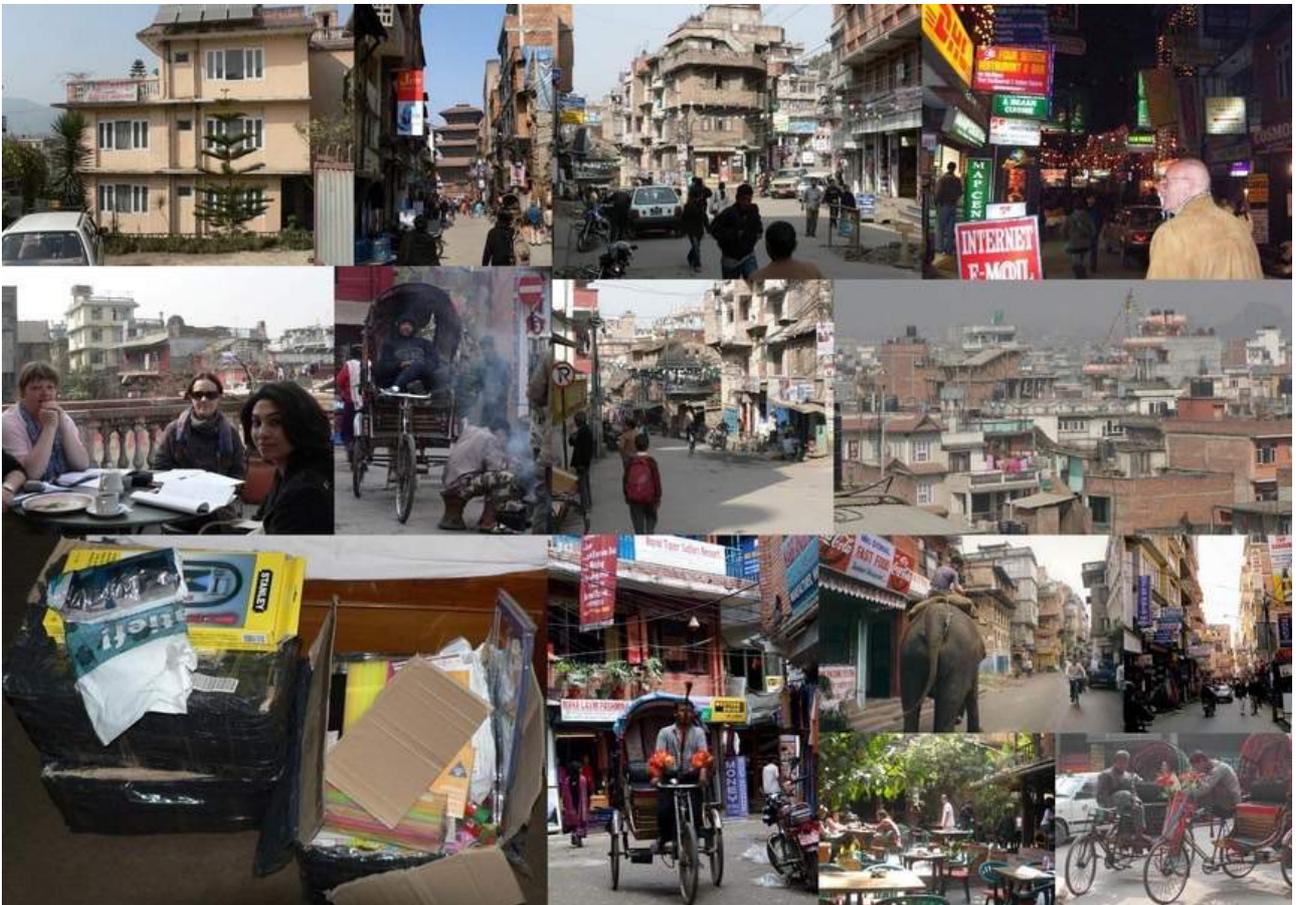
And that wasn't all....We also went to Pashupathinath Temple and Bagmati Riverbanks. The temple is one of the most sacred Hindu temples in the world. So sacred that non-hindus can't go in to the inner part of the temple. But nevertheless it was very special to be there. Especially because the place was crawling with sadhus, holy man in orange.

It was pretty funny because there are a lot of fakes amongst them who are trying to earn money by posing for pictures. You can spot the fakes a mile of because as soon as they see a tourist they start to act and if they think you're not watching anymore, the fall asleep again....

The holy Bagmati River flows through the complex and on its banks there are the ghats were on a daly basis hindu people are being cremated.



Boxes



Back in the guesthouse my three boxes with goodies have arrived. Gemma and I sorted through them,

because it would not be good to take it all to one place. It was like shopping with someone else's money in Pandora's box. Fab! The stuff I am not taking to the DRC with me, will of course go to other H&H-orphanages.

So all who contributed something should know that a lot of children will benefit from their gift. You really done yourself proud!

Kathmandu Durbar square



Saturday, March 1, 2008

Day 6

Nepal, Kathmandu, Thamel (KTM tourist area), a cyber cafe

From today's Nepali lessons onwards I am joint by Lazal, another H&H volunteer from South Africa, but living in Dubai. That gives me a chance to revise what I have learned so far. Actually Nepali seems quiet a logical language, it is more the quantity of the information I am struggling with. But people here react quiet nice when you use there language, so that helps.

In the afternoon Lazal and I walked down to Durbar Square and that is one incredible place with thousands of temples big and small. And of course there are people - Nepali and tourists a like - every where. And cars of course. Which makes it all a very busy and buzzing place to be. No wonder it is a Unesco world heritage site.

One of the palaces is from the Kumari Devi, the royal Kumari, ergo a living goddess. This is a little girl chosen because she has 32 specific physical characteristics from the size of her teeth, the sound of her voice, to the colour of her eyes. The girls who meet all the criteria are than put in a dark rom together and frightened with terrible pictures and sounds. The girl who remains the calmest is of course the new Kumari.

That means that she's moved in to the not so big palace at Durbar Square with her family. She makes a few ceremonial appearances per year and sometimes shows herself to the tourists who visit her palace by appearing before a window. She didn't when we were there.

The girl stays Kumari until her first period. Than she gets a nice dowry and is back to being a mere mortal again. (That must be hard to swallow!) They say marrying an ex-Kumari is unlucky, but others say taking on a very spoiled ex-goddess is a bit to much work for any perspective husband. And who can blame them really.

Patan



Sunday, March 2, 2008

Day 7

Nepal, Kathmandu, Thamel (KTM tourist area), a cyber cafe

After today's lesson Sristy took Lazal and me sightseeing. But first we made a stop at the H&H office for a few formalities like filling out forms (they do like that sort of thing here), paying and getting our H&H identity card which should help us getting discounts at all kinds of sights, shops and activities.

Which brings me to money talk. It is true what they say: Nepal is very cheap for us westerners. For instance, an evening meal with a main course and a drink would cost you 200/300 rupees, 2/3 euro. For pocket pictures for my identity card I paid 200 rupees. So you can quite understand why Nepali people would think all tourists are filthy rich.

Afterwards we went to Patan, just outside Kathmandu which also has a Durbar Square. Durbar means palace... This Durbar Square I found even more impressive, because of even more temples, shrines and maybe people. But - which I found a bonus - less cars.

It is really incredible how many beautiful places can be built on one square mile. Apparently very many!

It is amazing how welcoming all the temples are to foreign tourists who come in with their ever-zooming cameras. All long as you stick to the basic rules (which all come down to respect and sensitivity) you are welcome to see everything and take pictures almost everywhere. They are really a very nice and welcoming people. This says it all really...

I really should write something about traffic in Kathmandu. Keep in mind that this is a city absolutely not built for cars. It has thousands and thousands of little alleyways and just a handful of wider roads. The streets are full of all kinds of obstacles like potholes (big, small, shallow and deep), piles of stuff (bricks, sand, rubbish). Then put in people walking on the streets, rickshaws and imagine driving through that in a car. You can imagine that driving here is a challenge, but the Nepali seem up for it. They are amazing at avoiding accidents....

The downside to all these cars in a place like this is of course pollution. Kathmandu is situated in a 'bowl' between hills (or as we Dutch would say mountains). So therefore the air doesn't really move fast, if at all.

Put together with the constant supply of fresh car exhaust fumes and the use of kerosine in the kitchen and there you have it: smog!

No wonder many people walk/drive around wearing face masks of any kind. Actually, I started using one because it is really bad!

Newari dinner



We - Naresh (of H&H), Lazal and Me - end the day at a Newari restaurant, were the serve delicious traditional Nepali food spiced up with traditional Nepali dances. Of course very touristy, but very tastefully done I must say.

mmmmm.....

Transfer to Jorpati



Monday, March 3, 2008

Day 8

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

Today is a special day: my transfer to Jorpati. Meeting my host family for the first time and maybe even the kids. But first things first. Had my last language class today, or more exactly culture class. Yuzeena told us a lot about the caste system, the arranged marriages, eat with your right hand, leave your shoes at the door and so on. Basically it all comes down to respect and sensitivity. I think I can do that, so I don't expect any problems.

The taxi ride to Jorpati took about 45 minutes. The taxi driver was Krishna, who is more or less the H&H-taxi driver. If all goes well, he is not one who tries to cheat us foreign volunteers out of money. He gets enough business of H&H not to do that...

It is another town but it feels like just another suburb of Kathmandu: I never saw us leave one for the other, but than again, they are not big on street/place name signs in these parts.

Because of the rain Jorpati seems a very dreary place, but I am sure at one point or another it will become dry again....It is the dry season after all.

The house is a big one, but, I soon find out that they only use the first floor and the kitchen/roof terrace on top. The ground floor is - as soon as they can save the money, which obviously is not easy - to be made in to a business: restaurant or guesthouse. Until that time volunteers say there. There is room for 4 guests. Very nice! I have lucked out with this placement.

Meeting the host family was lovely: they seem such nice and welcoming people. And they had volunteers before so they know what to expect as well. I think I might have lucked out here. Gemma and I both have our own room, which of course is very nice.

First time in the DRC

After a nice hot cup of tea it's off to the DRC, Disabled Rehab Centre that I am going to be working in. We are just going for a quick look around, meeting the staff and of course the kids. We don't stay long because

many of the kids are studying for their exams and have other things on their minds than meeting a new volunteer.

After a short visit its of home to unpack and settle in. Just before diner Gemma and I joint the family in the kitchen. Mum Asha is cooking and we played cards with the kids. The two foster children in the household seem to be studying.

Than we have dinner: Dal Bath and afterwards a nice chat with mother and sun, before we make a polite exit to our rooms for some alone time.



Work started



Tuesday, March 4, 2008

Day 9

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

Finally I am starting to sleep a little better. So far every night I kept on waking up around 1 or 2 pm, which means no more than 2/3 hours sleep per night. That really is not much considering I am busy all day. I know that I don't take lightly to the time difference (Nepal is 4 hours and 45 minutes later than Holland) and it takes me usually 1 or 2 weeks to sleep normal again. But this night was the first time I fell back to sleep again after waking up around 1 am. Which in itself is progress even though I woke up a couple of times after that.

We left home around 7 am for the 20/25 minute walk to the DRC. The walk takes us along a sandy dirt road that today - because of yesterday's rain - was one long obstacle course of avoiding muddy puddles.

At the DRC the children are already up and about. Its time for breakfast... The kids are all remarkably able to take care of them selves and each other. Despite there obvious handicaps. It is hard to say what all of their problems are, but it looks like amputees (which is pretty easy to spot of course), cerebral palsy, spina bifida, scoliosis, maybe childhood polio and that sort of things. But there is no way of telling because there are nog records, no files, nothing.

But one thing is absolutely sure: the all are so cute, sweet, open and welcoming. It took me only a few minutes to start bonding. My role will be one of a big sister: just play with the kids, give lots of cuddles, be silly, help with homework, walk the little ones to school, organise activities. I think I can do that!

Almost all of the 55 DRC kids go to schools nearby the centre. Many of them walk to school, even though they have severe physical disabilities and the school walk is uphill... The bigger ones secondary school is further down the road so they are picked up by the school bus.

4 kids remain in the DRC all day because they are to severely handicapped (and wheelchair depended). That in itself is difficult enough in Holland, but just imaging having to relay on a wheelchair in a country with hardly any good roads and is all hills and mountains. It would be impossible to get around without help. That is why for them a teacher comes around to the centre.

Before the kids go off to school there is a little ritual: we wash there hands with soap, a sponge and hot

water and afterwards rub their hands with coconut oil. They absolutely love it. Their hands are so rough and this tender love and care really is appreciated. They stand in line for it!

The 4 staff do take very good care of the kids but they are very busy with cooking, cleaning, washing and so on, so they don't really have the time for these extra's. And this is exactly where we volunteers come in.

After we brought the little ones to school and are back at the DRC, we have fun for a while with those left behind. After that we sort of sneak out before we are being served Dal Bath, which is a bit too much for me in the morning.

Back home its time for other things: read, pottering around, maybe some local shopping for stuff we need for activities with the kids and of course our daily stop at the internet cafe....

We ended up walking rather a great distance through Jorpati. The town centre mainly consists of a wide road with a lot of mud because of the rain, heavy traffic (they don't do the low emission/green thing yet here), 'pavements' which are more of an obstacle course (steps, muddy patches, people sitting and selling things everywhere) and of course all the curious eyes: Gemma and I are basically the only westerners in these parts which makes us a bit of a curiosity....

Around 3 pm we went back to the DRC for the second tour of duty. Another 20/25 minute walk, this time in looming rain. But in the end we just about made it there dry.

The kids were just out of school and were already doing their homework. They are pretty studious and eager to learn. They really seem to appreciate the fact that getting an education is very important and gives them a better chance in life, especially since they have a handicap and live in a handicap unfriendly country.

Gemma and I set up shop at one of the long tables in the kitchen with a pack of pencils and the colouring in drawings I brought from work. They were an absolute hit!

It seems a very simple way of entertaining the kids who finished homework, but they enjoyed it immensely. These kids are not yet as spoiled with entertainment choices as they are in our part of the world. They still appreciate the small gestures and that makes working with them an absolute privilege!

DRC accommodation



Wednesday, March 5, 2008

Day 10

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

I should tell you something about the DRC accommodation. Basically it is a 2 story brick building with a corecated iron roof that is held down by stones. There are two dorms: one for all the boys and one for all the girls. There is not enough room for beds for everyone, so the little ones share a bed. There is no heating, the walls are bare.

Between the two dorm rooms there is a little outside veranda with to big tables were homework is being done. There is not very much space for playing and running around: the space they do have is unevenly paved with bricks (not very wheelchair friendly) that slopes quiet a lot.

Downstairs there is a little tv room, a storage room (but not much to store there). Upstairs there is an office, staff quarters and a play room. Problem is that they don't have furniture or play materials to put there so the room stays empty.

In a separate little building there are 3 toilets and one shower for 55 kids and 4 staff ... And of course there is a big kitchen with big tables. Nothing fancy though. All very basic!

Eating her is not as sociable a time as we are used to. The kids (and more over Nepali in general) eat for survival. As soon as they are finished, they wash their hands and are of doing something else. Which can leave one reeling at a big table all on your own...

The kids are of school and we are planning a big party: a dance contest. So today is all about practising their dances. There is a lot of excitement in the air, as you can imagine.

Boudhanath stupa

Gemma and I went shopping near our favourite hangout: the Boudhanath Stupa. We bought some treats like crisps and cookies for the children, which the normally never get and some prices for the dance contest. Of course I have quiet a few prices in my boxes full of goodies, but no hairpins which the girls really like. So hair clips it is...

Host family



Thursday, March 6, 2008

Day 11

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

Let me tell you a little bit more about my host family. There is Devendra, the dad. I haven't really spoken to him yet because he's been ill.

There is Asha, the mum. She is very sweet and caring, and a great cook.

Oldest daughter is Sumedha (17). She doesn't really interact much with the volunteers.

Sun Sushant (15) is the complete opposite and is very talkative, speaks good English and likes to exchange stories with us volunteers.

And then there are the two foster children (sisters Sweetie and Sabina) who came from a difficult family situation and have been taken in by the family.

Devendra is the oldest brother of Rabyn, the guy from Hope and Home.

Dancing & singing

Today we spend the whole day at the DRC. Because it is a holy day (Shivaratri = Shiva's birthday) the children are off school and we have planned our dance competition. Everyone is pretty excited!

We've got little prizes for all the participants and for the winners even a medal. That is a good thing since they practised and practised and danced their socks off during the presentation. And all this despite their disabilities.

The prizes go down well: it is good to see that these children still appreciate a little gift. All in all you could say it was a resounding success.

Just one exception: little Hemantha (an adorable 5 year old) is a bit sick today. She is quiet withdrawn at the best of times but today she is totally out of colour. So lots of cuddles for Hemantha!



omo's



Back at home we went straight to the kitchen to join the family for a momo (dumpling) making session. Very hard work but so rewarding because they are absolutely delicious.

We ate the momo's around a big fire on the rooftop terrace. What a great evening with good food, great company and a warm fire. What else could you want....

We introduced roasted marshmallows for dessert which seem to go down well....

Sunglasses



Friday, March 7, 2008

Day 12

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

Very misty walk to the DRC this morning. Could hardly see a thing. And a cold one too.

Hemantha is not doing so well today. In fact she might be worse. Today she gets some medication and if that doesn't help, they will take her to hospital in the morning. I hope she'll be all right!

They others still need their walk to school though, so thats what we'll do.

We take the afternoon session off because the kids seem really tired and not really up to anything but rest. In stead Gemma and I go down to the Boudhanath Stupa for a relaxing afternoon of sitting on one of these rooftop terraces, people watching, diary writing and drinking tea. Pretty nice!

At the end of the afternoon we take the taxi back and get out near the house of the host family. But getting out nearly cost me my life, because a mini bus driver (who are even more crazy road raged drivers than the rest of them) decided it was a good idea to overtake is on the left side via the pavement at a speed of 40/50 km per hour. He took the door of off the taxi, which of course is a lot better than my arm....Of course they tried to blame us and make us pay, but we didn't. In the end they knew that the minibus driver was to blame and left us alone...

Daily walk

Every day we walk from the house to the DRC and back, most of the days twice a day. It's a half hour walk a long a long straight very sandy and dusty road, were idiot drivers drive way to hard, fast and dangerous.



Gerdo & Tessa



Saturday, March 8, 2008

Day 13

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

It is the weekend and I am back in town for the night. Just for a change of scenery, maybe even meet some friends and a hot shower and faster internet.

Just met Gerdo and Tessa again, a dutch couple I met earlier. They are traveling around the world by train. Along the way they do volunteer work here and there. Very nice to see them again: they might even come and visit me at the DRC....

I spend the rest of the day in an internet cafe to work on my blog and some of these sunny rooftop terraces for a read, a drink and later on some dinner.

Back at the guesthouse I meet Catherine, yet another H&H volunteer, this time from Canada. She is going to join Lazal in Pokhara tomorrow.

All in all just a nice relaxing day!

Hemantha



Monday, March 10, 2008

Day 15

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

To see the kids again this morning was great. They were so happy to see us even though all we do in the morning sessions is talk, say hello, give lots of cuddles, our handwash-than-rub-with-coconut-oil-ritual and of course the school walk. That uphill walk would normally takes 5 minutes. But not today. Today we have to stop at the holy tree: The kids love to give us a tikka (little red dot on the forehead) there.

And today was the day for another grooming session by Nanna: She loves to do my hair. I am still not sure if I love it as much.

Hemantha is doing a lot better today. Not yet good enough to go to school, but at least she is up and about. Which in itself is progress.

After our porridge breakfast (which we eat after returning home from our morning session at the DRC) with the family, we are of buying blank drawing paper. Than we take another break at one of these delicious rooftops with the Stupa in sight at Boudhanath. Oh, the horrible live we lead....

We pamper ourselves even more by getting a taxi straight to the DRC instead of an hours walk in the dust...

Drawing is again on the program. We tried to introduce some drawing games but that doesn't work. Just drawing is the favourite.

Both Gemma and I end up with loads of pictures with this text: "Roses are red, The sky is blue, Oh my sister I love you!" How sweet is that?

Gerdo & Tessa

Wednesday, March 12, 2008

Day 17

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

Well, what a day this has been. Mind blowing really. This is what happened: Don't know if I told you, but during my first weekend in Nepal I met some amazing people. Two of them are this Dutch couple called Gerdo and Tessa, who are traveling the world by train. They were staying at the same guesthouse and one morning they were sitting on the same roof terrace where I was having my Nepali lessons. Somehow we started talking and really hit it off. We made dinner plans for that evening but circumstances occurred and that fell through.

So, this weekend when I was back in town again, I literally bumped in to them at the corner of the street. They asked me all sorts of questions about my first experiences as a volunteer and about the DRC. Then they told me the school where Gerdo used to work had a fundraiser the day before. They expected to get 1000 euro for this place in which they did volunteer work in China, just before they came to Nepal. It turned out to be a little bit more than that: 5000 euro!

Gerdo and Tessa thought that that might be a little bit too much money to spend in one place. Therefore they were planning to ask the school if they could spend some in Nepal, for instance at the DRC. Well, you can imagine my excitement! Keeping my fingers crossed that they say yes, because the DRC can really use the help.

Well, today is the day it all materialised. Gerdo and Tessa visited Gemma and me at the DRC today. So they could meet the kids and see for themselves that any help would be greatly needed and appreciated. And of course to tell us that the school is okay with them spending money on the DRC!

How great is that?



With the help of Raby (from Hope and Home) we (Gerdo, Tessa, Gemma and I) had a meeting with Amrit, the DRC-administrator who really works tirelessly for the good cause. We made a list of things that need to

be done to improve the situation in the building. Luckily we all were totally on the same wavelength!

This is the list:

1. Sanitation/toiletries
2. Plastering of the now cobbles courtyard, that is really difficult going for the wheelchairs.
3. Staircase fence
4. Medicine
5. Physiotherapy room and equipment
6. Food/snacks/vitamins
7. School fees/materials/uniforms
8. Heating (there is none)
9. Basic stuff like underwear and socks of which there are never enough.

So tomorrow Gerdo, Gemma (she is in fact an occupational therapist), Tessa (nurse) and Rabyn will go shopping for things like a shower wheelchair and that sort of things. These things should really improve the life of especially the wheelchair bound kids and make it much more hygienic and thus dignifying. And boy do they deserve that!

Furthermore, the cobbled courtyard will be equalised and plastered. So again for the wheelchair users it will be much easier going. At the same time inside the building ramps will be placed wherever they are needed.

And all this will be done next week already. So I will be making loads of pictures of the work being done and the children using the new facilities afterwards and send them on to Gerdo and Tessa (so they can show there supporters how the money has been put to good use) and Gemma, who is leaving today.

So, I don't think I need to tell you that it has been one amazing day.

Bye bye Gemma



As I said, today is Gemma's last day at the DRC. Which is sad, because the kids will really miss her and so will I. We get along like a house on fire. She is one amazing crazy English woman. So lots of emotions and tears. These kids and the whole situation really get under your skin.

Gemma says she'll be back in Nepal and the DRC and I for one believe her. As for me, I will be back as well. Because I need to help to make this world a little bit nicer for these children. They can't help being born in a country that give zero priority to helping/supporting disabled children....

The day after



Thursday, March 13, 2008

Day 18

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

I am still buzzing from yesterday. Wow what an amazing day that has been. Gerdo, Tessa and Raby have been shopping today for the toilet chair that the DRC really need. And they succeeded. So another thing to tick of the list.

But first things first: Gemma is feeling much better than yesterday when she was in tears because of tummy trouble. But she is not good enough to go back to Thamel. So today she is staying put at the host family and we will go back to Thamel together tomorrow.

Because... this weekend we are going on a trip to Chitwan National Park with a group of 8 Hope & Home volunteers. We will be seeing tigers, elephants, birds, rhino's and so on....I am really looking forward to that one.

Studies

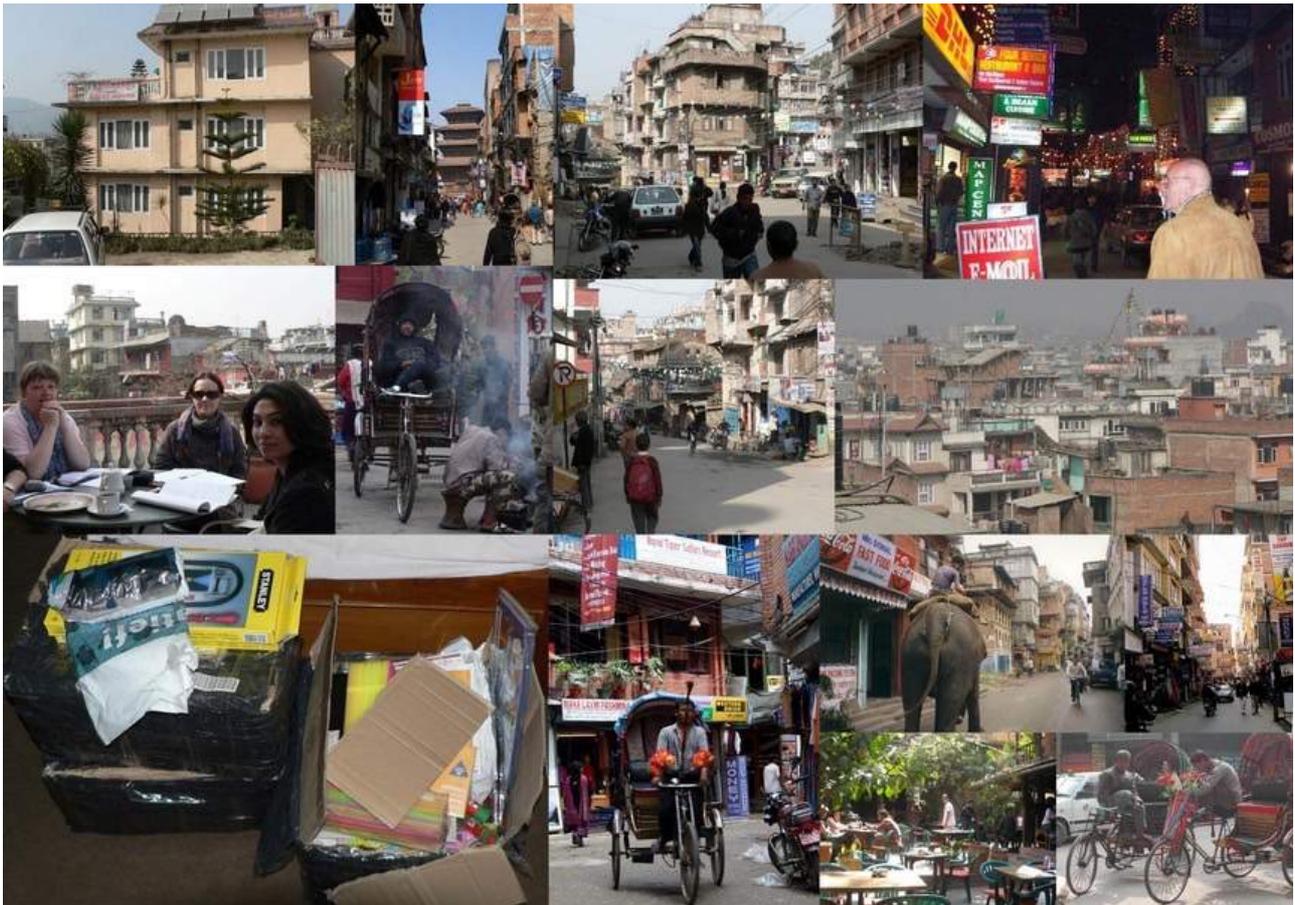
The kids at the DRC were not up to anything major after yesterday's excitement. They were very studious, with their final exams coming up. But drawing and colouring in is always good, even on the day after... So we only made a big get-well-soon/farewell-card for Gemma and lots of drawings...

In the meantime, Amrit (DRC administrator) got really busy after yesterday. He got a quote for the plasterwork. This will cost about 140 euro(!) and it will be done next Tuesday already! That is very exciting. I can't believe I met Gerdo and Tessa less than two weeks ago and we only had our planning meeting yesterday....Amazing what can be done when the right people put everything together.

WOOOOWWWWWWWW



Relax



Friday, March 14, 2008

Day 19

Nepal , Kathmandu, Thamel (KTM tourist area), a cyber cafe

So today is a day of not working. First its time for Gemma to finally say goodbye to the host family and a last morning talk with Asha and Devendra.

I've been packing for the Chitwan trip and than traveling back from the host family to Thamel/Peace guesthouse.

The rest of the day I spend shopping, having a late lunch and working on this blog. Doesn't sound very exciting, but believe you me, you need some days like this when you are traveling. And I for one am enjoying myself.

Baby elephants

Saturday, March 15, 2008

Day 20

Southern part of Nepal, Chitwan National Park, a cyber cafe

Today we took the bus from Kathmandu to Chitwan National Park in the south of Nepal. First of all it wasn't easy to get out of the city, because as I said, Kathmandu wasn't build for handling traffic, let alone much of it. And than of course there is the fact that nine out of ten drivers drive like first class road raged maniacs. Than add to the mix and unbelievable amount of roadwork's and the chaos is complete.

Thus the people I admire most in this city are the traffic police who risk life and limb on a daily basis to try and make sense of it all. I say try because traffic here doesn't do stopping for red lights, give way to traffic from the right or follow instructions of the traffic police if they don't like them.

When we finally do get out of the city we end up having a nice trip through to Chitwan. All be it that it took a bit longer (all most double) than the promised 4 hours... We followed the Trishuly River, with all kinds of hairpin bends, patches of extremely bad road surface, countless holes in the road and some scary close encounters with the ravine...

All along the route people live in al kinds of houses and huts. Some looked hardly strong enough to hold my bike, let alone a whole family....And they build them in very scary places overhanging the ravine and only supported by two or three beams. Let me just put it this way: I am very glad to live on the ground floor.

After arriving at Eden Jungle Resort in Chitwan we visited a Tharu village where one of the 60 Nepalese ethnic minorities live. It felled a bit 'Volendam'/'monkey looking' to me....



The absolute highlight of the day was of course the visit to the Elephant Breeding Centre. They are bred and trained for work in the tourist industry and seemed to be treated pretty good as far as I could tel. Of course the small ones are always the cutest. There were two who were just 2 weeks old and still getting used to their trunks. Very funny.

Bathing the elephants



Sunday, March 16, 2008

Day 21

Southern part of Nepal, Chitwan National Park, a cyber cafe

First thing on the agenda was a ride on an elephant through the jungle. Of course a very touristy thing to do, but nevertheless a very nice experience. We all went to see the elephants.

To get up an elephant, you climb on a platform, step on its bum and take a steep on the special 4 person 'chair'. All extremely elegant of course...

And that was not all, because our elephant choose our ride to have it out with her older sister. They charged and made a lot of noise. It turned out they were not friends at this moment in time.

At times it was a bit scary, but as long as the mahouts were laughing we were okay. And its quiet amazing to hear them communicate and feel it as well, especially the low sound we can't hear: You can feel the trembling....

At one time one of my fellow passengers lost her camera case and the elephant picked it up with her trunk and gave it back to her. How nice is that?

All in all a rather special experience. Little did I know then that the best was yet to come: actually bathing with and the washing of the elephant in the nearby river. They do like their water ballet and love playing in it and with it. And when you get up, close and personal with them, they happily let you join in the fun. That means trunks full of water spouted over you. And in the end they will just lay on their side and let you rub their skin. That was one magical experience.

Bus



Monday, March 17, 2008

Day 22

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

We are going back to Kathmandu. 'We' are Lazal (another H&H volunteer, the one I had my Nepali lessons with) and I. The rest of the group is going on to Pokhara for trekking. I will meet them there next week.

At the start the trip went perfectly normal. Until about 1 hour in to the trip: there was this very long traffic jam. It turned out that there was a riot: someone threw a stone at someone else, they fought and the military police stepped in and closed the road.

And they don't care for how long or how big the inconvenience this is to thousands of other people in the meantime. The only thing you can do is go do what Nepali do and just sit and wait it out.

After about three hours our bus company decided that enough was enough. So we changed busses with the Kathmandu-Chitwan bus on the other side of the riot. This only meant a 5 minute walk with all our language, or so the said. It turned out to be a stiff 5 km walk uphill in the burning sun.... So after that, you can imagine how good it was to have a nice cold drink...

From that moment the bus trip went well so we ended back in Kathmandu around 8 o'clock at night, only 4 hours later than planned. But that is just Nepal!

And as it turned out we were the lucky ones: the rest of the group that was going to Pokhara had to wait from 10.30 to 19.30 before restarting their trip. So they arrived in Pokhara only at 3.30 am the next morning and had to postpone their trek for a day.

Plastering the courtyard



Tuesday, March 18, 2008

Day 23

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

Spend the whole day at the DRC, because today is the day they are going to plaster the courtyard. Very exciting! The 4 workman and 1 work woman are already hard at work when I get there. The kids who don't go to school follow the work intently and are quite fascinated by it all. Everything is done by hand: carrying the sand, roda, cement and water, the mixing, the spreading it out and equalising the surface. But they do get the job done.

The kids cope remarkably well with the fact that they can't walk on the surface for a few hours: they - despite their handicap - just climb in and out of the window in the boys dorm. Cheeky monkeys!

Just one problem: just when we need it to be dry it starts raining. We will see in the morning if that means that damage is done....

Riska

Today is double special because I had a visitor: My colleague Riska spend a big part of the day with me. She also has long leave and is traveling Nepal, India and Uzbekistan ...It is really nice and a bit strange to see someone you work with regularly so far away from home. And no, we didn't actually talk one word about CliniClowns.

And when Riska went, Lazal came to visit me as well....Lucky devil I am. She is spending the night at my host family as well.

After dinner she teaches me a card game charmingly known as Shit head. Very nice game if only I could remember all the rules! So I end up making the same mistake again and again. What is that what they say about donkeys and stones?



Toilet chair



Wednesday, March 19, 2008

Day 24

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

This morning Lazal and I went by taxi (after some very skilled haggling on my part of course) to the DRC because we had to carry the toilet chair that Tessa and Gerdo bought. The staff seemed very impressed with it, but I don't know about the kids. I think it will take a bit of time to get used to it and learn how to use it. The damage caused by the rain seems a bit more severe than at first glance: it is totally not even and not at all what I expected. It's not solid, flat, there are loose stones everywhere. Even though they try to make it better by putting extra cement on the surface...I am not really sure this is helping... But not everybody cares...and who can blame them...

I think some extra work will be needed to make it right. Amrit assures me that that will be done soon... We will wait and see.

Wet wet wet



Thursday, March 20, 2008

Day 25

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

Today is the last day before Holy, the Hindu festival of colour. With basically means that if you want to stay dry and clean you should stay in bed all they. Because one step out site and you will be water bombed (with little balloons full of water) everywhere you go and probably also coloured with red, yellow, blue or other coloured powder. This will last today and tomorrow. Why do they do this? Because Holy is the celebration of a victory from the good over the evil.

So, I was surprised to see that when I arrived at the DRC it was both clean and dry. Not for long though, because the whole morning at the DRC is one big water ballet which leaves none of us dry. Lucky for us is that the weather is fantastic and it only takes a nice sit in the sun to dry up.

And after the water fighting there was a wheelchair race: Even though the concrete wasn't perfect, it was already much better than the bricks that where there before...

Holy



Friday, March 21, 2008

Day 26

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

Holy. Today I spent at home with the host family. Parents Asha and Devendra are at the temple all day, because today is also a special day in their family. The kids stay at home to play Holy: through coloured water bombs from the roof terrace to that of the neighbours and get them back as well.

So with in no time, they all look pretty colourful with their red/blue/yellow and green faces, cloth and hair. Of course I get the treatment and end up looking similarly ridiculous but it is fun! I like this festival. We should introduce this in Holland, I think.

Because tonight 30/40 family members are coming over for dinner and party, there is a lot of cooking to be done. And I offered to help which gets me the task of peeling potatoes without the aid of a knife. In Nepal they cook them in their skin and than peel the skin of with their bare hands. Which is remarkably easy once you get the hang of it. So after peeling to very big pans filled with little potatoes I officially passed the grade of Nepali Potato Peeler!

Plastered again



Saturday, March 22, 2008

Day 27

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

Today there was a big surprise when I arrived at the DRC: The plastering was finished and this time to the standard I - and more important Tessa and Gerdo - expected. They did it yesterday, so today it could be fully used. Which was great, especially for the wheelchair users, who seemed very happy with it all: This will make their life so much easier and even more independent because they don't have to ask for help all the time.

In honour of finishing this work and the end of the exam period - for which all the kids are really studying very very hard - we will have a 'concrete opening/end of exam' party next Saturday. That gives me a week to arrange things: Plenty of time. It is going to be great!

Sewing & typing

And there was another surprise...thanks to a donation from another group of Dutch benefactors, the DRC has now 5 computers (no internet though) and 6 sewing machines. So the kids can learn extra skills that will help them get a job later in life. So that is great!

Today also two doctors came to the DRC to test the kids eyesight. Before they could meet the doctors, all the kids had to fill out a form (they love forms in Nepal). And as ever, everyone helps each other with filling out the form.

And the elections on April 10 are hotting up things. Today there was a big demonstration by the Communist Party passing the DRC.

The rest of the day I spent packing, taking the taxi back to Thamel and the Peace Guesthouse, working on this blog, shopping and relaxing: Tomorrow my next adventure starts: a trip to Pokhara to meet the rest of the gang. Looking forward to that one!



To Pokhara



Sunday, March 23, 2008

Day 28

Nepal, lakeside Pokhara, a cyber cafe

First things first: HAPPY EASTER EVERYONE...watch out for the Easter bunny....

Today is the day of the bus drive to Pokhara. Which means a short night and early rise. Luckily for me that is not a problem. First half of the drive is the same as going to Chitwan. And just as you start thinking: 'Am I in the right bus?' it turns out that route and goes in to the unknown to Pokhara...pfffff....

Road signs are easy to miss in this country. First of all, there aren't many, and if there are, they are usually in Nepali script which is unreadable to us. And even if they are in western script, they are either dented or very vague or obscured from sight by bushes.

Asking the way is not really an option, because Nepali people in general don't want to lose face to foreigners by admitting that they don't know. Therefore they tend to give an answer and leave you with the question 'Is that true or not?' So, taking the bus or hiring a driver seems the best option out here.

It's unbelievable how much people carry around here. Big amounts of straw, wood, sacks of sand. You name it, they carry it. And all at once...Respect!

Coming to Pokhara I was thinking about nice weather and beautiful mountain views. Because that is what Lazal keeps on telling me. Imagine my surprise that it was totally overcast and raining heavily. Makes me feel just like at home....

After I have settled and rested, Lazal comes by. Together we visit the guesthouse she's been staying in. Pretty nice!

We end up in town having dinner in a steakhouse. A curious choice for a vegetarian, I must admit. Best decision I ever made though, being a vegetarian during my stay in this country. The way they leave meat lying in the burning sun all day makes me sick already. And of course there is the habit of eating every part of an animal...Scary. So my status as temporary vegetarian is perfect!

Trekkers



Monday, March 24, 2008

Day 29

Nepal, lakeside Pokhara, a cyber cafe

I opened the curtains today hoping that the sky has cleared, even though it rained all night. But, it's still totally overcast and there is no mountain to be seen.

I met Lazal again for breakfast at the lakeside. Very holiday, I can tell you. After that we went to the children's home where Lazal has been working. That is some place, everything the DRC isn't (yet) but should be. Nice spaces, good activity program, a library. Rather perfect. The DRC needs a lot of help to ever get up to that standard. There is still a lot of work to be done.

Back at the hotel I meet up with the trekkers who just arrived back. They are so exhausted but had a fab time! So, time to rest now. Later on we will meet for dinner and trekkers stories. It's going to be another good one!

Pokhara



Tuesday, March 25, 2008

Day 30

Nepal, lakeside Pokhara, a cyber cafe

Well, the plan was: sleep in, breakfast at the rooftop, take a boat out on Fewa Lake and laze around on the water the rest of the day. But: David is totally exhausted, Gemma is ill and, so am I. Nothing to worry about, just a nasty case of the Kathmandu cough. It started when I came to Nepal, and is gradually got worse. Its sounds like I smoke at least 2 packets a day, which I don't.

But anyhow, now it gotten to the stage that I start gagging and even vomiting. And that is not funny anymore. Especially since this happens 2 to 4 time a day and also during the night.

So, today I went to see a doctor who tells me I don't have a fever, I do have the blood pressure of a young girl, and I don't have a chest infection. So what do I have: properly an allergic reaction to all the dust, exhaust fumes and so on. He gives me some medication and it seems to work, which is good.

Because everyone takes a 'sicky' today, all we do is have a little walk around town and sit at a nice lakeside terrace and chill. We are on holiday after all...

Busdrive back



Wednesday, March 26, 2008

Day 31

Nepal, Kathmandu, Thamel (KTM tourist area), a cyber cafe

Everything goes well until...Kathmandu. Than the problems really start. Traffic jams and so on. In the end it takes us 3,5 hours to finish the otherwise good journey.

The only thing we do the rest of the day - we arrived at the Peace Guesthouse around 17.30 - is have dinner with David. He is another Hope & Home volunteer. His reputation proceeded him: he is a hilarious Englishman. So, we had a good laugh.

Butterflies



Friday, March 28, 2008

Day 33

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

Something magical happened. During her visit home wheelchair bound Pemma practiced her hart out and no she's walking!

We had a great morning session at the DRC. Because more and more of the kids finished their exams and have a holiday now, we did an activity in the morning: painting cut out paper butterflies. That was another huge hit.

Afterwards we attached them to the barb wire fence with some string. That made it a little less prison like.

In the afternoon another volunteer arrived: Nicole from the US. She is a physiotherapist and will work at the Spinal Court Hospital across the road. Since Nicole doesn't start until Sunday, she joins us for the afternoon session at the DRC. That turns out to be a very short one, because the whole gang is going to a musical show in town and the just forgot to tell us.

We take advantage of our early freedom to plan the party for tomorrow and start thinking about our leaving party at April 7. I can't believe how fast time has flown...

Concrete opening party



Saturday, March 29, 2008

Day 34

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

Relaxing start to the day since we only have to be at the DRC around 11.45. Because today is party time! We are celebrating the end of the exams and the fact that the courtyard has been paved.

We start the celebrations by face painting first ourselves and then all the kids. Which means a lot of suns, stars, beards, moustaches to be painted and red noses. We all end looking pretty colourful.

Of course there are cookies and sweets and some little prizes to be won. Seeing everyone enjoying themselves is great. We end up having one hell of a party!

There is but one downside: Dhanbad, a little boy with a bilateral below knee amputation is suffering from horrible phantom pains today in one of his feet that he doesn't have. He cries all day and nothing and nobody is able to make him feel any better. Which makes me - and the rest of the gang - feel really helpless.

At the end of the party Rabyn, Bijen and Sristy from Hope & Home arrive and join in the party. We start face painting them and then start face painting us, and the kids join in. You can imagine the mess and how totally ridiculous we end up looking.... I end up looking like a cross between Alice Cooper and Popov, which is a scary thought....

And Rabyn paid for a nice fizzy drink for the kids...good on him!

All in all it has been a great day. One that the kids will remember for a long time and that is what it is all about!

Boudhanath stupa



Sunday, March 30, 2008

Day 35

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

After sleeping in (which here means max 8.30) I head upstairs to do some washing. After that its time to go out. Today for the first time in a long time I am going to be on my own sweet self. I am rather looking forward to that.

I take the microbus (which basically means to many people in to little a car) to the Stupa, my favourite place in the whole of Kathmandu. It still amazes me every time how quiet and peaceful it is there. It really is like you step in to a completely different world.

And of course there is the added bonus of all these gorgeous rooftop terraces from which you can see the Stupa in all its glory. So no matter what, you always end up having a drink under the watchful and all seeing eyes of Buddha.

I divide my time there between sitting/reading/having a drink and shopping for jewellery: I end up buying some incredible pieces for ditto prices.

DRC walk

Another walk I regularly make is the one from the house to the DRC. Basically one straight road with lots to see and many people and places to pass.



Black Tuesday



Tuesday, April 1, 2008

Day 37

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

Today was a horrible day. Actually it started yesterday evening already: some idiot taxi driver drove over Rachel's foot, leaving her in a lot of pain. Nothing is broken, but still it's not very nice. That is why Hannah and I go up to the DRC together.

When we get there, there is already some commotion near the river dam, which is in front of the DRC so that you can't quite escape the scene. They say it has something to do with April Fools' Day, so we don't pay too much attention.

But after an hour or so the crowds are really growing and they start poking in the river with these long bamboo sticks. It looks like they are searching for something. At this point the story is that someone has gone missing and they are now searching the river. Which gives the morning a totally different twist.

If there really is someone in the river, he/she is already dead and they should just get in the water and get the body out. It's not that deep: you can stand everywhere so finding the body should be easy.

Problem is that 99 percent of Nepali people can't swim and are particularly afraid of putting their heads in the water since there are ghosts living in the river... So the wannabe hero boys who by now are in the water are probably swimming over the body, but don't dare get it out. All this takes about 3 hours, and still the crowds are growing.

I find it all so bizarre and macabre, don't really want to see it, but can't really escape it either because the kids are totally fascinated by what is happening on their doorstep and keep on calling me over to watch. But luckily not everyone is interested...

It is a girl. I am told she is 17 years old and committed suicide because her mother did not approve of her choice boyfriend. Another story is that she was pregnant and the boyfriend didn't want to marry her. Which ever is true, it is very sad and I am shaken by all of it: the spectacle that it turned out to be, the lack of respect for the body once out of the water, the laughter at the obvious despair of the family.

When Hannah and I walked back home, it's still very hot but we can see clouds coming. By the time we are

home it is totally overcast. From that moment on the weather turns nasty: there is a big storm coming: thunder is roaring and there is lightning. But, brave as we are, we do go out once more to find and buy some pots of coconut oil that we want to put in our goodie bag/hamper for the DRC when we leave. Around 15.00 it's so dark that it looks like evening and then the heavens open: It keeps raining heavily until late in the night.

So we have nothing more to do than stay in side, read, write and work on the goodie bags we are going to present to the children on Monday when we have our leaving party.

We called it Black Tuesday

Gorkana Mahadev temple



Wednesday, April 2, 2008

Day 38

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

This morning at the DRC everything is back to normal. The kids want to play and people are using the river again for washing themselves and their clothes. But somehow I find it hard to wash the feeling of sadness away looking at that seen. Which makes this a good day to visit the Gokarna temple which lies on the top of the hill behind the DRC.

Pampering

Back in the DRC it was time for some card games and some pampering, like they did before with Gemma. That means I loose every time. The kids love that.

Back home Rachel's foot hurts so bad that she decides to go the hospital. When she returns she knows what is wrong: She pulled a tendon, got a brace for support and some painkillers.

I again try the internet cafe, but the connection is so slow, that I can only just open my mailbox in 30 minutes. That is why it takes me a while to react to mails I get...it is so slow....And you all have to wait just a little bit longer.

Later on in the evening Nicole (who is a trained Clinical Massage Therapist) massages my knee, or rather a muscle in my upper leg. My knee has been hurting on and of ever since I walked up and down the 365 steps to and from the monkey temple. And she tells me, that my knee hurts because one of the muscles in my upper leg is gone spastic. The massage is painful but I hope it helps.



Pictures



Thursday, April 3, 2008

Day 39

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

During the morning session at the DRC we show pictures we brought from back home. The kids are really interested and start asking a lot of questions. So it all turned out to be very educational.

Laxman



At the end of the morning session in de DRC, Laxman walks back with us. We are going to visit his aunts

house, where he stays during the holidays....He is so happy we are going with him! It's so touching!

I skip the afternoon session at the DRC to give my leg a rest. But not for nothing, because Sristy (one of the Hope and Home guys) comes by with bags full of goodies for the DRC kids. Fantastic stuff which will come in very handy when we start filling the goodie bags.

Paper chains



Friday, April 4, 2008

Day 40

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

I just can't believe that my time at the DRC is almost up. It has gone so fast. It seems like yesterday when I arrived, and it's only today, Sunday (when I am walking to a nearby Buddhist monastery which the kids who feel like going) and our leaving party is on Monday.

It will be hart breaking to leave the place by than. But I have already decided the come back next year which makes it a little bit easier to say goodbye but still. And besides saving for my return trip, I will spend my free time in between fundraising for the DRC, because these kids really deserve it and the money will be spend well by the people in charge.

Rachel, Hannah, hopefully Gemma (but she doesn't know this yet) and me will try and raise the money for a solar system that will provide year round hot water for 60 people. That will cost 2000 US dollars. So between the four of us, we should be able to get that kind of money together by the end of summer. It really would mean the world to all of us to know that the kids would never have to take a cold shower again. Especially when it gets colder here in autumn and winter. So if anyone has got some spare cash...

During the afternoon session at the DRC we make paper chains. Super simple but such enormous fun. I have never seen so many kids have so much fun with a few meters of their self made paper chains. It's still true here: you don't need much to be happy!

Photo's



Saturday, April 5, 2008

Day 41

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

Today I took an early taxi to Thamel. During the trip I try to make some pictures of Jorpati and the trip to Kathmandu...

I needed to do some photo things, such as making a backup cd, select photo's for printing for mine and Gemma's goodbye present for the DRC and ditto for the host family, select photo's to put up on my blog as soon as I am in India, where internet is about 100 times faster than here. And of course I needed to buy some presents. (I am so going to bring my laptop next time: there are many cafe's with wifi here, so that would be way easier!)

By the time I have done everything I needed to do it is well past midday. When I get back home in Jorpati I start working on the DRC photo album: apart from a nice gift it serves a purpose. In a country that doesn't really care for disabled people, where many people think disabilities are a punishment of god for some bad deed in a previous life, this album can help show that disabled children are just as normal children: they laugh, they cry, they learn, they can do anything everyone else can but just in a different way. That they deserve to be treated normally and to have all the happiness you with every child.

When I get back home eventually I'll make some collage like poster photo's and send them to Nepal.

Missing the kids already



Sunday, April 6, 2008

Day 42

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

Hannah and I went for a short visit to the DRC in the afternoon. We missed the kids to much to not go. They were busy watching a film on tv and with a sewing lesson on the new machines. We took the bigger ones for a bit of walk up the hill behind the DRC. Our adventure was short lived though, because of rain. But nevertheless it was fun.

Shopping



Later on today Rachel joined us for some shopping for our farewell party tomorrow and we finish making the

goodie bags. They turn out exactly right: something nice in there for every one, nothing too big or overdone. Just right. And in addition there is a hamper with goodies for the DRC as a whole.

We did good here!

Saying goodbye



Monday, April 7, 2008

Day 43

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

Today is a special day. A very special day. Our last, for now that is, because all of us already decided to come back next year. I have grown so attached to these 55 kids that it is going to be heartbreaking to say: 'bye, see you next year'. But, it has to be done and we will go out with a bang: one hell of a party that will give the kids lasting memories.

We spend the whole day at the DRC and party. So, loads of games, some fizzy drinks, dancing, singing, receiving presents and even more cuddles, even from the kids who normally aren't that cuddly, loads of kisses, 'I don't want you to go, 'I will miss you's and so on. You can understand that it was a very emotional day, with lots of tears and smiles.

Right at the end there some speeches, we give our gifts, and we receive some Buddhist shawls (that means thank you and respect) and some very nice words are spoken to us. Than it is really time to go and we do. I don't know how, but with lots of hugs, waving and tears. Just writing this makes me cry again.

I miss them already!!!

Another goodbye



Tuesday, April 8, 2008

Day 44

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

Today is the first day of the rest of my trip. I feel good about my volunteer work and the way we said goodbye yesterday. Its one of those days that will stay with me for the rest of my life...

This morning there was another goodbye. Rachel and Hannah have gone of to Pokhara for rafting and trekking. We had a great time together so it's a pity to see them go, but there are already plans to meet again this summer in London, so...

Stupa by night

Later on I go pashmina shopping (pashmina's are the shawls that Nepali and Indian women wear like jackets all the time) in the city with Asha and Sabina. Asha says I get a better deal when I am with them. And its true: the shopkeepers all say they would have charged me way more I had been on my own. Well, lucky me than.

Later on by nightfall I go to the Stupa with Nicole. It is very busy, many people come to worship after a days work. We just sit on a bench and people watch. There are many monks in there characteristic red dress, Tibetan women in there traditional outfit, many more western looking Tibetans, a few tourists. They all walk quiet a fast tempo clockwise round the temple, working their prayer beats with their left hand, some turning to 108 prayers wheels at the bottom of the stupa base with there right hand and others turning their own personal prayer wheels in that hand.

Watching it is like watching a film. Some people are obviously in some kind of trance, others are conversing with each other and some are even on the phone. Pretty surreal, but very nice to see.



Hospital



Wednesday, April 9, 2008

Day 45

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

Went to see the hospital where Nicole works. And I must say that I was impressed. Yeah it is dated. Yeah it was dark. And Yeah, it smelled like disinfectant. But, at least its clean, well staffed and reasonably well stocked. There were a lot of things I know from hospitals in Holland, only way more dated.

I don't no if this is the standard of hospital care in Nepal, because it's in de capital. If it is, I say well done. But, I must say, I think not.

We are talking about the Spinal Cord Hospital, the one and only in the country. If you hear the stories of some of the patients, you realise that you are indeed in a developing country. Take the story of Amida, the girl in de picture: This 17 year old girl who fell of a cliff 9 month's ago and broke hear to arms and back. She will never walk again. After the accident they took care of her at home because the family is too poor to bring her to a hospital. She stayed there for 8,5 month's until an NGO-worker heard her story and did something about it. She was suffering from very severe bedsores and was in great pain.

Now she is taken care of in this hospital and in the two weeks she has been here, many of her sores either have or are healing. And she's now starting training so she can be as independent as possible. She will always need help though, because getting around Nepal in a wheelchair is simply impossible on your own.

Elections



Thursday, April 10, 2008

Day 46

Nepal, Jorpati, a cyber cafe near Aryal family home

It is Election day in Nepal. A very historical day. The people are choosing the 601 member strong constitutional assembly that will have 2 years to make a new constitution. All this is a direct result of the peace treaty between the rebel Maoist movement and the 'regular' parties. And that follows on the Royal massacre in 2001.

(The entire Royal family and a large part of the Royal household was murdered. The official story being that crown prince Bianendra went completely berserk because his parents didn't give him permission to marry the girl he loved. Everyone in Nepal believes that story is not the truth. In fact the king's brother Gyanendra wanted to be king and he took drastic measures. How else can you explain that only his direct family members were either not present at the banquet where the murdering spree took place and all survived?)

Well, if power and kingdom was what he wanted, he only partly succeeded. He did become king, but power.... Ever since his coming to power slowly but surely politicians have been restricting his powers. At present he has only very few ceremonial functions and if he comes out in public is not favourably treated by his people.

One of the first things the new assembly will do is declaring Nepal to become a republic and sending the king of to ordinary citizenship. Don't feel sorry for him though, apart from having his family's blood on his hands, he has taken good care of himself. Every surviving member of the family (even the babies) earn salaries of millions of rupees, which is disgusting in a country with so many extremely poor inhabitants.

So far it's obvious that the Maoists have done very well in the election. Which in itself is not strange because they did do a lot of good things for the have-not half of the Nepali people. But the way they go about their business is less nice: they threaten, force and beat up people to get them to do what they want. It gives them coming to power a bit of a bittersweet taste.

In a country with many people who can't read or write it's no use having voting forms with text on it. So they made them with pictures: not of the candidates, but of symbols. So one party is the tree, another a glass, yet another a cow and so on. Confusing because poor people have to remember that the party/candidate they

want to vote for is in fact the tree or some symbol.

I went voting (or rather to see the voting) with Asha and Devendra. They had to vote in a nearby secondary school, or actually outside the school, since it was an open air voting station. Some nasty looking military man came to see if I where an international observer from the UN. Well, no, just an interested volunteer, explained Asha and Devendra. Ohhhhh, than it was okay, and I even got a smile...

Bye bye family



Oh yeah, another curious thing about these elections: today in the whole country it is forbidden to drive any kind of vehicle. Why, because they want to pre fend people from voting more than once...

Nepal does not have a proper registration system of all its inhabitants. For instance Asha is registered 3 times: at birth by her parents, when she got married and when they moved to their current home. Apparently they don't apply changes to the original registration, but just enter a new one...

So Asha got tree calls to com vote in three different districts. And rather than cleaning up the registration system, the government chooses the complete traffic ban as a solution. A very Nepali way of dealing with things.

The rest of the day we spend at home: making and eating momo's (like Chinese dumplings). It's a lot of work making them, but they are so delicious that its well worth the trouble. And I handover my presents, one of which is a little photo album I made for the family.

Bye bye Nepal



Friday, April 11, 2008

Day 47

Nepal, Kathmandu, Thamel (KTM tourist area), a cyber cafe

My last full day in Nepal and another goodbye. This time I am the one who is leaving. Saying goodbye to the host family is difficult. Over the last 5 weeks we have become great friends and I have felt very at home and welcome with them.

But as I said before, I am coming back to Nepal next year so it is only a goodbye and not a farewell. And we will keep in close contact via the internet in the meantime. But still, I just don't like saying goodbye!

The rest of the day I spend in Kathmandu, Thamel and at the Peace Guesthouse, my second home away from home. I do last minute shopping for presents, surfing and packing.

In the evening there is dinner with the Hope & Home gang. All the boys are there and a few new volunteers. One of which is Paolo, who is going to the DRC...I am so jealous! He read my article and is very much looking forward to the experience. That is great, the kids really deserve that!

Back in India



Saturday, April 12, 2008

Day 48

India, Delhi, Tibetan Refugee Camp, Tibetan Cyber Cafe

First about the weather: In Nepal I have had freezing cold, bloody hot, rain and thunder...pretty much everything the weather gods can throw at you. The last few days were perfect sunshine, blue skies and 25°C. But not this morning. It was grey, overcast and only 19°C. Is Nepal just as said about me leaving as I am?

Today is a travel day and therefore not very exciting: I waited. For the taxi, for check-in, for filling in countless departure forms (oh they do so like there forms here....If you wake me at night, I can now recite my passport number without opening my eyes....And same goes for my Nepali visa number...how sad is that), for boarding, for take-off, for disembarking, for luggage....

After all that, being back in Delhi is a shock. I new it would be warmer here. But from 19°C this morning to 38°C in the evening is a bit of a shock to the system. Pffff....

Hello India



Sunday, April 13, 2008

Day 49

India, Punjab, near Chandigarh, Pinjorie Gardens

The first day of my round trip through the North/Eastern part of India. I am traveling around with my friend Lazar, who is a fully licensed tourist driver. That sounds very posh, but is actually a pretty common and affordable way of traveling around in India. My friend Lazar took me to lunch in a very famous roadside dhaba. The food was fantastic!

We leave Delhi around noon to go north. The first 100 km out of the city are not very exciting. It is a wide road that is currently being upgraded to a real highway. All along the way there is evidence of India's booming economy. Everywhere building work is going on and new luxury housing, shopping centres and leisure complexes arise. All very nice for those who can afford either. Problem is though that India has an enormous group of people who will never be able to afford anything remotely like that.

You see evidence of this group all along the route as well: they live in huts, tents, shacks that you and I wouldn't even park our garbage containers in... It is unbelievable and shocking to see how these people have to live, work and have to endure in life. I will certainly never get used to seeing that.

After about 100 km the landscape changes to more green and agricultural. For someone who just spend weeks in a dirty town like Kathmandu/Jorpati that is a very welcome site. I am glad to leave town life behind me for a while....

Pinjorie gardens

Around sunset we arrive at Pinjorie Gardens, a 17th century Mughal (Islamic dynasty) walled garden. It is a very popular hangout for Indians on their day of. Everywhere families are have a picnic, which gives the whole place a very relaxed atmosphere.

I spend the night in Hotel Divinity, opposite the gardens. The name is way more glamorous than the accommodation. Really all I can say about it is that there are no creepy crawlies and there is a working fan...



Chandigarh



Monday, April 14, 2008

Day 50

India, Punjab, Chandigarh

Today it is hot. At 10 am it is already 38°C...pfff.... But I get used to it and just have to slow down. I am aloud to, I am on holiday....

In the morning I visit Chandigarh, India's greenest city build in the 1950s by the world famous French architect Le Corbusier...(I had never heard of the man, but than again, I am not known for my architectural knowledge)

Le Corbusier was commissioned to design a new capital city for the Indian State of Punjab. He opted for concrete government offices, artificial lakes, symbolic sculptures and tree lined wide roads. The low density, low rise houses are build in 1 square km neighbourhoods with their own facilities like shops and schools. It all sounds nice and there are neighbourhoods that are very pretty, but

I found Chandigarh special but nog necessarily beautiful. I am no fan of concrete and the rows and rows of identical houses seem perfectly boring to me. And part of India's charm are the extreme contrast you see everywhere around you: rich and poor, ugly and beautiful, colourful and black and white, clean and dirty and so on. Chandigarh misses many of those things and that makes it relatively ordinary in my humble opinion.

I visit Nek Chand Rock Garden. A hard to explain site. But pictures say more than words, so see the photo albums...

We are invited to eat lunch at Lazar's cousins house. He and his young family (wife and two kids) live on the outskirts of the city. It turned out to be very special, because they are very nice, fantastic hosts and even better cooks...and I got their chicken recipe!

Indian people are in general very family orientated. Many of them call all their family members from their children's generation sons and daughters (their own kids, the kids of there brothers/sisters and cousins). Same goes for family members from your own generation: they are all brothers and sisters. All very nice but very confusing for a tourist from Europe...

Naar Amritsar



After lunch we drive to the holy city of Amritsar. We are now in Sikh-country. You can see that everywhere. Most men wear a turban to keep their hair (which they will never cut from puberty till death) in check; on the road you see many trucks and horse and carriages full of people coming and going to temple; many temples; and ditto places where everyone (Sikh, non-Sikh, foreigner, untouchable) are invited for a free meal and drink.

We arrive in Amritsar after dark and I find a room in a guesthouse with direct view of the Golden Temple. Sounds expensive? Well, it isn't. It's actually very cheap and still clean...so I am lucky.

Guru Nanak

And it turns out I am even luckier than that: Today is the birthday of Guru Nanak the founder of Sikhism, a very special holiday for his devotees.

That is why I spend the evening in the Golden Temple Complex. It is like walking around in a fairy tale. The white marble complex is lit by millions of little lights, there are thousands and thousands of devotees (men/women/children) walking around, sitting and burning candles at the lakeside, a few are even bathing in the holy lake surrounding the temple.

Everyone is listening to the constant sounds of chants and prayers uttered by one of the priests who keep that going 24/7. And every now and again the devotees join in the prayer and sing. I just walk with them and listen or sit and look. It is a truly magical experience. I can't really describe it other than special, extremely special!



It's all golden



Tuesday, April 15, 2008

Day 51

India, Punjab, Amritsar

As usual I woke up pretty early this morning. Just before sunrise...and that without the help of an alarm... So I just did what the Sikh do: go to temple, which is open 24/7. It wasn't as busy as last night, but still a fair number of devotees are there.

First thing I did was visit the Golden Temple itself in the middle of the holy lake. To get inside you have to wait a while amongst the devotees. Some of whom look like they are in sort of a trance from praying and chanting. Although it is complete overcast, it is still a special way to welcome the new day like this.

Let me tell you a little bit more about Sikhism: Guru Nanak started it in 1469 because he was not happy with some of the practices of both Muslim and Hindu. Unlike many Indian holy man he believed (and practiced) family life, hard work, all man are equal (so no caste system), no worship of idols, no fasting and diet restrictions. He appointed his most talented disciple as his successor, not one of his own sons.

Golden kitchen

In every Sikh temple you will find a community kitchen where all are welcome for a free meal and drink. The biggest one of those kitchens is of course in the Golden Temple Complex where daily 30/40.000 guests are welcomed. The food is simple but tasty and its very nice to join in the huge dining hall where everyone is sitting in neat rows on the floor.

As the only foreigner there at the time, I attract a bit of attention. But my very friendly neighbour soon send them packing with 'just leave her in peace!'. Thanks!

All the food is cooked by a small permanent staff with the help of lots of volunteer devotees. Same goes for the washing up, cleaning and general upkeep of the whole complex. And there is no shortage of volunteers. On the contrary: Many devotees wait a long time for a shift.

The rest of the day I spend going on the internet and other computer things (oh I am so bringing my laptop next year), wondering around town and people watching....Believe me, that is better than television! And of course I will visit the temple again...I can't get enough of the magic...



Rain



Wednesday, April 16, 2008

Day 52

India, Himachal Pradesh, McLeod's Ganj (Dharmsala)

Today was a strange day. I woke up in Amritsar, to the sound of chanting priests in the Golden Temple and....Rain. Not just a little bit of rain, but unbelievable rain: it reminded me of the rains surrounding a hurricane I endured years ago in Guatemala (gee, that sounds really blasé...)

Anyhow, it was bad. Really bad. I think it was a taster of the monsoon season that starts next month...

Before we were out of Amritsar, the car broke down and it took 2 hours to get it moving again to Dharmsala/McLeod Ganj. During the early hours of the drive we went looking for an ATM. And you those time that when you need something is nowhere to be found and when you don't there/it is everywhere. Well, that was what happened with the ATM.

And when I finally found one, it wouldn't except my kind of cards. So after about 20 villages and even more ATMs, we finally found one in some Godforsaken place that did take my card.

Into the mountains

So, with money in the pocket we went of in to the mountains. Punjab is as flat as a pancake, in fact if I didn't know better, I think I was in Holland. But that feeling soon goes away when we almost ran in to a holy cow that had decided that the middle of the road is the place to be...

The nearer we get to the mountains, the more beautiful the landscape gets. And it gets really incredible when the Himalaya's come in sight. Wow, they are majestic!

I am now in McLeod's Ganj, the Hill station part of Dharmsala. This is the place where the Tibetan Government in exile is (and has been) since 1959. As you may have heard, these are special times for Tibetan people who are trying to get the world to notice their plight. Tomorrow evening I am going to take part in a daily (and peaceful) candlelight walk to the residence of the Dalai Lama. That is supposed to be a special experience and I don't want to mis that.



We meet again



Thursday, April 17, 2008

Day 53

India, Himachal Pradesh, McLeod's Ganj (Dharmasala)

Well, I should have known better by now, because some amazing things have already happened during this trip.

I woke up early with the sun shining on my face, which makes it kind of easy to get out of bed.

My first port of call for today was the Dalai Lama residence. I knew he wasn't there because he has way more important things to do these days, but it was still good to go there. His house is a nothing fancy part of a nothing fancy monastery complex, but you don't go there for its architectural values.

Anti China protest

As you must have heard, Tibetans everywhere are protesting against Chinese occupation of Tibet. And now that the Olympics are drawing ever nearer, so the protest are getting more and more intense.

Like many of you I learned in school about Tibet and the Chinese policy there. I knew it wasn't pretty, but being a free-country/after-the-war born-baby, I never knew how really bad it has been and still is for the Tibetans.

Not only is Tibet invaded and taken over by the Chinese, also:

- More than 1 million Tibetans have been killed as a direct result of the invasion and the freedom struggle since.
- Many more have left Tibet for safer places like Dharmasala/McLeod's Ganj in India, Kathmandu in Nepal and other places.
- More than 6000 monasteries and religious buildings have been totally destroyed
- More than 60 percent of sacred religious scriptures, books, prayer wheels and so on have been destroyed

- The fragile Tibetan ecosystem and delicate nature have been or are being destroyed
- Many many Tibetan children have lost one or both parents during their walk to freedom through the harsh Himalaya's
- An unknown quantity of Tibetans are missing and there whereabouts are unknown.
- There is plenty of evidence that Tibetans in Chinese prisons are being tortured.
- ... and the list goes on and on....

After learning all that one can understand where the passion of the protestors is coming from.

Just outside the residence monks are holding a relay hunger strike for a free Tibet. It is a very impressive sight to see Buddhist monks protesting in this way. You can feel the power of their conviction and their passion, especially when they start chanting things as: "China, China, China, OUT OUT OUT", "Wat we want? Freedom!" "UN help us!" "World stand by Tibet" and of course "Where is the Panchen Lama, we want the Panchen Lama!" (the Pachen Lama is the successor of the Dalai Lama who was taken away by the Chinese when he was only a boy. That is now 12 years ago and nobody knows were he is and if he is still alive...)

Inside the complex there is a small museum that tells the story of Tibet and its peoples struggle. It's told by survivors and that leaves an impression. Especially after seeing and hearing the hunger striking monks and reading all the pamphlets on missing Tibetans that are plastered all over the entrance wall.



After all that I need a break. So, I go to temple where hundreds of monks and other devotees are praying. As a foreigner you are welcome to sit down with them. The atmosphere is very serene.

On reflection I realize that I am a very lucky girl to have been born in Holland after the war and never knowing anything else but peace. I really cannot imagine wat it must be like to be a Tibetan and have your country, your culture, your heritage, your people etcetera taken away from you and completely destroyed. And than to be confronted by the Chinese attitude that they should shut up and just take all that lying down without a wimper. That is simply impossible!

Well, you can understand that my head was spinning after all that, so I decided to go back to the hotel for some surfing. But on the way back, I did visit a workshop were women were weaving.

Than I finally got back to the hotel. As soon as I entered I saw...Gerdo and Tessa, the Dutch couple I met

earlier this trip in Nepal and who payed for lots of improvements to the DRC Nepal were I did my volunteering.

I was really stunned to see them, because I thought they were in Bangalore. But they weren't. We spend a wonderful afternoon together and than said goodbye again. Because they are booked on the night bus to Delhi.

Peace and quiet



Saturday, April 19, 2008

Day 55

India, Himachal Pradesh, (Old) Manali

Today we traveled from Rewalsar to (Old) Manali, another beautiful drive through the Kullu Valley and the surrounding mountains. Its green, there are snow peaked mountains and amazing views. Absolutely stunning!

I stay in a little lodge with a big apple orchard and mountain views. It so beautiful that I decided to stay her for a few days. There nice walks to be made and some nice day trips to do by car. I will amuse myself, I think. Especially since I already made friends with a few of my fellow guests at the in.

Walking



Sunday, April 20, 2008

Day 56

India, Himachal Pradesh, (Old) Manali

I walked, walked and walked today. Through woods, along riverbanks, up and down mountains, to temples, little villages and viewpoints. One better after another. Coming from a flat-as-a-pancake-country I always find mountains fascinating. And the Himalaya's, well they are in an outer category, aren't they...

And than the air quality here. It is fantastic. So my Kathmandu-cough is finally starting to go...

After finishing my 5 hours of walking I decided to laze around the guesthouse for the rest of the day. Which is very nice because there is an excellent terrace with mountain and apple orchard views....

A few other guest had the same idea so we ended up talking about our travels and watched each others photo's on a laptop. They have been to some places I have been and many I have yet to see....still so much to see and so little time to see it in....

Snow



Monday, April 21, 2008

Day 57

India, Himachal Pradesh, (Old) Manali

Went up in to the mountains today to the Rothang Pass. A more than beautiful drive with one spectacular view after another. Totally amazing.

From right down in the valley all the way up to the top there are thousands of little shops where you can hire snow dress: fur coats, ski outfits, gloves, heads and so on. Because many Indian tourists who are now visiting this region come from the South where it never gets cold so they don't have that stuff. Going up everywhere you see people fitting these winter dresses. It is really a very funny sight, because they are not used to wearing it.

It is actually compulsory to wear warm clothes going up the pass, every 100 meter there is a military man checking if you're dressed warm enough. ...

And once up there you can understand why: it is freezing. It is fantastic to see the many Indians experience snow for the first time in their lives. Some go crazy, others stop and stare, but all are absolutely fascinated! It is hilarious to see.

And I had another surprise. Jude - one of the guests in the guesthouse - hasn't left yet like she was planning to. Her dentist appointment fell through and is now planned for Thursday. So she is staying on for a while. Which is nice because she's nice. She is an English lady who's been living abroad for 14 years. First in Kenya and Turkey to teach at an International School and the last few years in India. She spends her time traveling here and doing volunteer work. At the moment she volunteers at a Buddhist nunnery near Dharmasala. Well, you can imagine the stories she can tell. So it's nice that she is here for a while yet.

Roerich



Tuesday, April 22, 2008

Day 58

India, Himachal Pradesh, (Old) Manali

Went to a little village near Manali called Naggar. Art lovers might know that place because of the Russian painter Roerich who lived there for a long time. I didn't know him, but I can understand why he came to live there, because his house had a stunning mountain view. The only thing I found a pity though was the fact that there are only 14 paintings of him to be seen in the house, the rest is permanently shown in New York.

With views like this, it isn't hard to imagine where the man got his inspiration from...

Naggar castle

On the way back we stop at a cheese factory run by two Italian brothers and bought some cheese, olives, bread and fresh apple juice. If that sounds like a great late lunch that's because it was exactly that!!!

But before that, we visited Naggar Castle, a bit lower down the same mountain. The Castle is completely built out of wood. Obviously built by very skilled carpenters and carvers.



Hot springs



Wednesday, April 23, 2008

Day 59

India, Himachal Pradesh, (Old) Manali

This morning we started early, really early. About 5 o'clock. We went to the hot springs in a neighbouring town. We wanted to get there before the morning rush in the springs started and it worked. There were only a handful of local women there. They found it very funny to share their morning ritual with four white tourists.

When I say hot springs, I mean really hot springs. It took me an hour to get in there. But then I am sensitive when it comes to hot water...My hot showers would be considered loop warm by most.

But I did emerge myself in the water and gee, that got my circulation going...it was very nice!

After a start like that, there is only one thing to do: have a nice breakfast and relax. So that's what I did. I spend a few hours with a book on a nice sunny spot in the orchard near the guesthouse. And I had a beautiful modest mountain walk with stunning views...

I ended the day with a brisk walk along the nearby river. It was very nice because I hardly saw a soul. All in all a pretty nice and relaxing holiday-day!

Moving house



Thursday, April 24, 2008

Day 60

India, Himachal Pradesh, Kasol

I moved house today: After four days/five nights I said goodbye to (Old) Manali and the lovely guesthouse. I had a wonderful time there but it was time to go to the next place. So we ended up - after another stunning drive through the rocky mountains - in Kasol, a few km before Manikarn.

We in this case are my friend Lazar and me and Jude, the English lady I met in the guesthouse. She is coming with us for three days: after that she has to get back to the nunnery. It's nice to have the company for a few days.

Travel days are never that exciting to write about since it's mostly enjoying the scenery. I am not very good at writing about scenery so I keep it short and tell you that when I get back home I put up the pictures and films I made and then you can see for yourself..

Bye bye Jude



Saturday, April 26, 2008

Day 62

India, Himachal Pradesh, Simla

Since I am on a roundtrip today I am on the move again. But not before I have breakfast at the same stunning place where Jude and I spend all yesterday afternoon. It was still a super place with a few to die for.

En route we pass a little procession: A holy shrine is moved from one place to another.

In the morning we drove to Mandi: there is the bus station where Jude had to take the bus back to the nunnery. So it was time to say goodbye, again. That is the only part of traveling I don't like. But I am sure we'll keep in contact.

In the afternoon we drove on to Simla. The landscape is grand: Mountains, rocks, valleys and many monkeys. Though it is not as lush and green and beautiful as around Kasol, it is certainly very impressive!

Shimla doesn't strike me as a place I want to stay to long. It's very hectic and has not got very much to offer. But it's a good stop on the way to all the other places I am going to visit....

Simply stunning



Sunday, April 27, 2008

Day 63

India, Himachal Pradesh, Paonta Sahib

I have just had the best travel day you can imagine. The best in the sense of views. This must be one of the worlds highest-density-of-stunning-and-breathtaking views-route. It was one long stream of fantastic scenery. The only thing I can say about it is: WOOOOWWWWWW!!!!

We went from Shimla (which indeed is nothing special) via Kufri, Chail and Nahan to Paonta Sahib. This probably means nothing to you, but when I am back I put up some pictures so you can see for your selfs..take a look at the photo album.

OMG



Monday, April 28, 2008

Day 64

India, Uttarakhand, Mussoorie

Well, It had to happen at some point during my 10 weeks this side of the world. I have been had, big time. Not financially, but physically... This is what happened:

After a short drive from Paonta Sahib we arrived in the mountain place of Mussoorie around noon. Like many mountain towns, the centre is closed to cars. That means I have to walk with my backpack to the guesthouse I wanna stay in. Normally that is no problem. But this time I have been had.

I ask for the route to this place I want to stay in and some locals told me: 'go left, is only 2 minutes'. And so I started walking. Now, since this is not my first time in India I know that Indian minutes are longer than ours. But this was ridiculous. It took me 2 hours! And this in the burning sun and fully packed with a big and a small backpack. As it turns out, they should have send me to the right and than it would indeed have been only 2 minutes. So, you can understand I am not going to do anymore physical exercise today....

But it was worth it. My little guesthouse is lovely and I have a room with a stunning view. So all the work was not for nothing!

I spend the rest of the day exploring the town, which has a nice, layback and relaxed feel to it. There are quite a few tourist, Indians as well as fellow foreigners with makes a nice mix.

Waterfall

Tuesday, April 29, 2008

Day 65

India, Uttarakhand, Mussoorie

Today was a good day, again. Like most of my days really...lucky girl I am! I went to the Kempty Waterfall near Mussoorie. They are supposed to be something special. Well, they weren't, at least not in my eyes. I know this is going to sound really blasé (which I don't mean it to be) but after seeing Victoria Falls in Africa, Aqua Azul in Mexico and Epoupa Falls in Namibia it was always going to be a bit of a let down.



But never mind, it was a nice day out anyway, because Indians can make something out of nothing: so, they started about 100 little shops and cafes on the walk up and down along the falls, placed a few arcade like game machines here and there, of course there's also an ice cream parlour and voila, you have a bit of a circus that attracts many - mainly Indian - tourists.

Indian tourists really make a day of it. The dads and the kids take a dip in the little lake at the foot of the falls, the moms sit in one of the little shaded cafes looking over them. Everyone is enjoying themselves, which is always nice to see.

On this expedition I am joined by Eduardo, a Spanish guy from Barcelona who is staying in the same guesthouse as I am. He is in the last part of a one year long trip around the world. We got talking yesterday and since he was going to the falls as well, it seemed only logical to ask him to join me. We ended up having a good time.

From the terrace of the guesthouse we can see this schoolyard were they have start and end of they assemblies in the courtyard.

Today I also started thinking about how I am going to raise 500 US dollars as my part of the new solar system for the DRC Nepal.

The first thing that comes to mind is my birthday in august. I appeal to everyone who is thinking of buying me a gift on that occasion to not do that. Please just give me money. I know many people don't like to give money, but please make an exception in this case. By doing so you'll contribute to changing the live of 55

deserving Nepali kids who really need and deserve this improvement in their life!

Hot hot hot



Wednesday, April 30, 2008

Day 66

India, Uttarakhand, Rishikesh

First things first: to all Duchies: A very happy Queens day to you all!!!

There is another goodbye on the program today. This time I said goodbye to the Himalaya's. I left the mountains behind as I left Mussoorie. Destination today is down to hot, hot, hot Rishikesh. It is only 39°C here. That is a bit hot after being in the mountains where during the days it might be up to 30°C, but at night it really cools down to fleece wearing cold.

But not in Rishikesh...it only cools down 4 or 5°C...so, you can understand that I wanted a room with a ceiling fan...(airco here is no good: rooms with ac are expensive, they are very noisy and don't really work the way they are supposed to....) and I got it.

At the end of the day I took the little ferry to get to the other side of the Ganga (cold water...just out of the mountains...and clean...) I went to one of the many Ashrams there to be witness to the daily Aatri ceremony that takes place around sunset. The ceremony at the waterfront at the feet of the enormous Shiva statue was really nice and serene.

To Hindu people the Ganga is a holy river and they treat it with so much respect. On the boat, people splash each other lightly with its water, they love to bath in it at one of the many ghat's and everywhere people bring offerings to the river in the form of little bowls with flowers and/or some rice or other eatable stuff, a little candle...it looks pretty nice.

The River here is very clean and cold, just coming from the mountains...and because it was hot, I had to swim in it...very cold. But it was good to be able to dip in the holy river!

Relax



Thursday, May 1, 2008

Day 67

India, Uttarakhand, Rishikesh

Today is a very relaxed day. Couldn't be any different even if I wanted to. First of all, this is Rishikesh ..the capital city of relaxation in the form yoga, new age and that sort of thing. Not really my scene, but nice nonetheless. At least I get to take lots of pictures of lots of Sadhu's (Hindu holy man) who are here in there hundreds. And second of all, its pretty hot, so you need to chill anyway.

But since I am an early riser, I did my sightseeing all in the relative cool time of day. And I saw it all: Lhaksman Jhulla (bridge, only for pedestrians) and the surrounding area: the temples there and the market and than walked to Ram Jhulla (bridge, only for pedestrians) and did the same. By the time it got too hot, I went back to the guesthouse for some serious relaxation.

During my relaxation I reached a milestone: I finished listening to my audiobook...30 hours of Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. So, another classic under the belt.

Back to Delhi



Friday, May 2, 2008

Day 68

India, Delhi, Para Ganji

Today I started to make my way back home really. The route from Rishikesh to Delhi. On the way we stop at this apparently very famous Indian fast food restaurant called Cheetals. And I must say, the food there is of way better quality, variety and freshness than the fast food places we now and love (to hate...) And there is - apart from the food - something unmistakably Indian about the place. As a well to do tourist I am immediately brought to the airco area of the restaurant and served by a waiter. No way can I go to the self service counter, that not the proper way in India apparently... After so many weeks here it is still hard to be treated as a Mam/Madam only on the bases of my white skin and the size of my wallet.

Back in Delhi is try what the said...Jesus, it hot here. Today it is only 43 degrees... And because of the rain its also very humid. A deadly combination. So I treated myself to a slightly more upmarket hotel than usual. Normally I pay max 300 rupee a night (max 5 euro), but now its 1000 a night. But for that I get a nice room with a colour tv and a good working airco, so I can at least sleep well.

Packing



Saturday, May 3, 2008

Day 69

India, Delhi, Para Ganji

In India you can't be on the road for long without seeing tata trucks. They are big, base coloured orange, most of the time overloaded and really scary. One is even more decorated than the other...

This morning I walked through the Para Ganji area of Delhi, were my hotel is. It was before nine and already almost 44 degrees.... This area is Delhi's backpackers district, so lots of foreigners. You can pick the once that just arrived in India a mile of. They still have this bewildered 'God why the hell did I come here' look in there eyes. Even so you can spot the seasoned travellers who look relaxed, at ease and unfazed by everything. You concluded for yourself to with group I belong...

And it is so hot and sweaty that I forgot to take any pictures to day...

Since it's really way to hot and dirty, and I have seen everything there is to see in Delhi, bought all the souvenirs and presents I only dipt in the rooftop swimming pool and packed my backpack. ... That was a challenge, because its heavy. I have to charm my around having to pay extra for excess luggage I think. We'll see how that goes tomorrow.

On the way home



Sunday, May 4, 2008

Day 70

India, Delhi, Para Ganji

Well, after 10 weeks it has come to this, my last day in sweltering Delhi. (I am not sorry to leave that behind, really 43 degrees is bit on the warm site...) It's really unbelievable that it is almost all over now. It's true what they say...time flies when you're having fun!

And boy did I have a good time. I can only say it like this: It was even better than I expected. Highpoint by far was of course my volunteer work at the DRC with those incredible kids and my meeting and staying with my host family. But traveling around the mountains in northern India was also fantastic.

And in both countries I met some really nice people with whom contact will last, I am sure. (I have - amongst other things - already open invitations to Gent, London and Dubai...) So finding something to do in my next holiday will not be a problem...

And like when I left Nepal, the weather in Delhi is disgusting my last day: very hot, humid and thunderstorms...

I end my stay in India where it began: having a home cooked dinner at my friend Lazar's house. As always it was a fantastic feast of the senses. A very fitting end.

@Home



Monday, May 5, 2008

Day 71

@ home

I am home. It's been a long trip. The night flight from Delhi to Zurich was sleepless: I was the lucky one to sit next to a man who couldn't sit still. He constantly moved and touched his neighbours. After 1,5 hour and many times asking to stop and be still, I complained to the purser. Since I wasn't the only one who complained about the man, they took him away and placed him somewhere where he wouldn't bother anyone. Pew, that was a relieve.

It didn't really help me to sleep though, because I don't tent to sleep in airplanes. So long live my iPod, a book and some in flight entertainment to get me through 8 hours plus flight.

At the airport in Zurich I have to run to catch my connecting flight to Amsterdam. But, as you would expect of the Swiss, everything goes very neat and smooth and therefore I make it just in time.

70 minutes flying later I land in Amsterdam. My father and Will and my friend Marijke are there to meet me, which is really nice. We drink coffee/thee and than its time to go home.

I am in two ways about being back home. Its very good to see family and friends again, and of course my cat. And to have all the comforts of home sweet home is great after living out of a backpack for 10 weeks.

On the other hand, I had such a good time, especially with the DRC-kids and my host family, that would have liked it to last much longer. But it is as the say: nobody can take the memories away, and boy do I have some good ones!

Thanks for reading my story over the last few weeks!