

## Ralph Raskas - Medicine in Nepal



In July of 2012, I began a journey that would take me 8,000 miles away from home. At only 16 years old, I was determined to make an ordinary summer into a life changing experience, by traveling far from my home to help others. I was an incoming junior in high school, living in St. Louis, Missouri in the United States. I came across Projects Abroad online and it seemed like the perfect opportunity for me. Hoping to study medicine and always having an affinity for the Himalayas and Nepali culture, I knew I had found what I was looking for. My family thought the idea was crazy; however I was intent on having a broader view of the world.

As I prepared for my endeavor in the months prior, I applied for a passport, reserved my flights, received necessary immunizations and read about the culture of Nepal. The sole experience of making all these arrangements on my own, led me to learn numerous new life skills.

### Arriving in Kathmandu

Perhaps the most anxious moment of my adventure was when I had left Lambert St. Louis Intl. Airport, alone. It was then that I had acquired a new sensation of complete independence. After arriving in Newark, New Jersey, I was then on a connecting flight through to Delhi, India. When I had disembarked after a 14 hour flight, I was in a state of culture shock. Spending the night in Delhi Airport was an intriguing experience.

As the sun rose in Delhi, I boarded my final connecting flight to Kathmandu, Nepal. Even though I was physically exhausted, I was excited and anxious to arrive during the short flight. Finally landing at Tribhuvan Intl. Airport just outside of Kathmandu, I went through customs and collected my bags. I went outside to the passenger pick-up area, a somewhat chaotic scene and immediately saw someone in the distance holding up a Projects Abroad sign. I was warmly welcomed and escorted to the van by the Projects Abroad volunteer supervisor.

The drive from the airport to Hotel Excelsior was startling. I had never been on such chaotic streets. As we entered the Thamel district, the streets became very cramped. I rested for the entire afternoon, until I had dinner with all the other volunteers. This was a fun dinner, getting to know all of the other volunteers my age from around the world. We



also received our itineraries and welcome packets.

## My Medical Placement

The next day we were off to Chitwan, with our luggage strapped on top of the vans. After 6 hours of bumpy and noisy driving we arrived at Hotel Global in the Bharatpur district of Chitwan. The bus ride offered some stunning views as the road curved through the valleys. The kind staff of Hotel Global greeted each of us with an authentic Tibetan scarf. We then settled in our rooms and had a fabulous lunch. Throughout our two-week stay at Hotel Global, every meal consisted

of delicious cultural food.

From this point, we went to our daily placements during the weekdays of the two-week program. The Projects Abroad project supervisor was extremely friendly and helpful. He was only a phone call or quick motorcycle ride away from us at all times.



My time spent at Chitwan Medical College was fascinating. I was able to volunteer in the emergency room and shadow the attending physicians. A variety of medical cases were being treated. I was able to acquire a lot of new medical knowledge. I also was able to see the orthopedics ward, where there were many cases to learn from. Perhaps the most intriguing experience there was in the operating theatre. I had the privilege to shadow up close the following surgeries: a C-section, thyroid surgery and small intestine surgery. The doctors were extremely welcoming and were more than happy to answer questions about each operation.

My placement also included some other medical facilities. At the Community Hospital, I was able to shadow and assist pathologists. I also observed quite a few endoscopic procedures. There were many friendly doctors at this hospital who explained all the procedures in English. At the Bharatpur Eye Hospital, I had the opportunity to volunteer with the patients and watch some minor eye procedures. It was rewarding being with patients who were having their vision fixed, after it being impaired for years. I also spent time at the Marie Stopes Family Planning Clinic. Here, we volunteered with the patients and observed some procedures. Our lunches were mainly held at the hospital canteens. The local Nepali food they served was delicious, from authentic curry chicken to the classic momo dumpling plate.

The rest of our placements were just as rewarding as the first week's placements. I spent time at the Bharatpur Cancer Hospital where I observed radiation therapy for cancer patients. The operators of the equipment welcomed us and taught us the basics of their day-to-day occupation.

In addition to our placements, many medical school experiences were arranged for us. We had a lecture on pathology, which was intellectually stimulating. A lecture on common poisoning was taught by Dr. Daya Ram Lamsal. He explained the basics of poisoning in the Nepali culture. Lastly, an anatomy lecture and demonstration was guided by Dr. Birendra. The doctor was knowledgeable and we all left with an increased level of human anatomy understanding.

## Weekend Trips



After an amazing week at our placements, we were on our way to Chitwan National Park. It is truly a beautiful place, covering over 350 square miles. Elephants, tigers and rhinos are just some of the rare wildlife that inhabits the area. The weekend at the park began with a hike to view the sunset from a riverbank. The view was breathtaking, with the sunset just above the surrounding mountainous terrain. After returning to Hotel Global, we celebrated our wonderful weekend at the national park with a momo-making party. We enjoyed our tasty homemade momos outside by the hotel swimming pool.

Emotionally, the best activity of the fabulous trip was teaching Nepali children dental hygiene. We took a bus to one of the main community schools, just outside of Bharatpur, Chitwan. The kids were so enthusiastic and filled with joy as our bus pulled up. They waved to us from their class windows and ran down to meet us. We split the Nepali children into groups that would teach them the basics of taking care of their teeth. I demonstrated how to apply toothpaste, brush and rinse. They seemed to understand the gist of it. Each one of them was curious about how my life and family was back in America. The kids were extremely friendly and truly kind, even though they are living in poverty. This was a touching aspect of the event. Speaking with them was a pleasure. They were very curious about my family member's names and my own name, cutely laughing at the unfamiliar English language. I have never smiled as much as I did while spending time with the Nepali school kids. This alone changed my view of the world significantly.

Our last few days were spent in Kathmandu, doing some sightseeing. The Swayambhunath temple was beautiful and had an awe-inspiring view of the Kathmandu Valley. Apparently, the multitude of monkeys roaming around the temple is a normal occurrence. The Pashupatinath temple was equally as interesting, with many religious men dressed up in their colorful attire.

## Leaving Nepal

To conclude the fabulous two-week special experience, we had a traditional Nepali dinner, at the Bjojan Griha restaurant. This was our last time to spend time together as a group. It was an amazing time to reflect on the new friends we had made from around the world and on the extraordinary experiences we had in Nepal. I never could have had the same educational and emotional experiences anywhere in the United States. Saying goodbye to the supervisors and other volunteers was the hardest part of the trip. We had built strong friendships over the short two-week period.

I truly hope others will consider Projects Abroad for a volunteer experience. Going to Nepal with Projects Abroad was by far the best decision I have made in my life. I now view the world with a different set of eyes. I realized that regardless of what cultural people live in, we are all very similar. Humans all have the same naturally predisposed hopes and aspirations for our futures. We all love to spend valuable time with our families and friends, regardless of wealth. The Nepali people further illustrated to me that happiness is not from a multitude of wealth, but from the simple pleasures life offers. I hope to return to Nepal one day in the future to relive some aspects of this extraordinary, life-changing trip.

## *Ralph Raskas*

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