

My trip to Hangdewa, Nepal

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The trip to Hangdewa was definitely more exciting than what I had prepared myself for. It was such a different world there, that just after 2 weeks, I felt that I had been away for at least a couple of months! It is hard to explain but it almost feels like the days go by quite fast, but at the same time, not much gets done in those days.

It takes almost 2 days to get to the village and 2 days back. The road was quite interesting, it was very narrow, bumpy and with a cliff on one side. But it also has the most amazing views all the way. So it was all good, as long as we don't look down 😊

We spent a few days in Kathmandu, trying to get over the jetlag, before starting our trip to the village on the 2nd Nov. I found out on the 1st, that the computers never reached Kathmandu (apparently, not many people were surprised about this) and so the other 2 volunteers, Michal and Arina, had to cancel their trip. That was very unfortunate. I was really looking forward to meeting with them. I went along with Lesley and her friends, to the village anyway, since I was already in Kathmandu and it was decided that I can check if there are any additional things we need along with the computers.

We reached the village around 1pm on the 3rd and were greeted by everyone from the school with marigold garlands. The children seemed very excited to say Hello and Namaste! After spending some time at the school, trying to get the hang of the layout and the general workings, we got to the principal/headmaster's house for an awesome lunch. All the vegetables and rice are grown in their farm. And they exchange other things like honey, etc. which might be made on someone else's farm. But it is definitely always local and homegrown.

The people are excellent and always helpful. Unless, of course, you get to Thamel, which is a shopping area in Kathmandu. You will be quoted a random price for everything you might want to purchase. For example, my son wanted a metal puzzle, which a street vendor was selling. He started off by asking Rs. 450 for that. But since my son had spent almost all of his shopping money by then, he only had Rs. 60 left. When we started to walk away, the vendor dropped the price a little at a time and eventually came down to Rs. 100. And this was without any additional bargaining from our side! I was super proud of myself – because I can never really bargain!

The next day was a school holiday and the school had arranged a welcome ceremony for us. In the morning though, we hiked up to Taplejung, the nearest town for internet access. It was about 1.5 hours up and about the same to get back. We wanted to access the block editors for Microbit, which Microsoft had donated to the school. The editor was online and once accessed and bookmarked it can be used in offline mode as well. But since the internet did not work in the village, we decided to walk up. We managed to get 1 computer working (yay!), 1 had an old Internet Explorer version. The other 2 laptops did not have battery in it and so needed a constant power source. Of course, by the time we got to those 2, the electricity went out 😊 After some discussion with Manoj, the computer teacher, we went to yet another internet café, which had generators for electricity. But after another hour and a half, we realized that the internet connection itself had a lot more issues out there and nothing worked. By this time, it was quite late and the event had already

started in the school. So, we headed back and reached the school by 2:30. The kids missed half the event and were quite upset about it. It was a great event and the school children and their parents seemed very engaged and were having a lot of fun. It was very evident that the people really appreciate what Lesley has done for the village by opening the school and being so very invested in the future of these children.

Over the next 2 days, I spent the time in the computer room trying to reconfigure the room to accommodate 20 computers, figuring out any additional accessories needed, internet issues and so on. The process is quite slow and you can feel their discomfort with the computers. The usage of computers, by the teachers as well, is limited to emails and basic browsing. So, if any of the computers has an issue, they don't really have a way to fix them.

We also spent time talking about the different ways my children's teachers use the computers for their regular assignments, including writing essays, science projects, research projects and so on. I do hope they start that, once the internet is up and running. 'Baby steps' is what I had to remind myself all the time! And at times, I also felt like a broken record, repeating the same thing over and over. I think, they understand the importance of getting the children comfortable with the computers and not treat it as a 'big black box that can do magical things'. Following up on a regular basis will help.

On the last day in the village, my younger son, Kunaal, fell down while playing in the fields. He fractured his elbow. What followed was definitely an experience of a lifetime for me and the children. Tanka, our host and the headmaster of the school, does not have vehicle of his own. Most people walk to Taplejung (1.5 hour hike), for everything. But since my son would not be able to walk (or me for that matter when he was crying so hard), Tanka arranged for 3 people, who had motorbikes. He carried my son on his back to where the bikes were. And then we rode to Taplejung, in the dark, with 3 complete strangers, on a road which was more like a bumpy hiking trail. I was on one of the bikes. Rohaan, my 10-year-old, on another and my younger son Kunaal, with Tanka and the biker on the 3rd. We rode for 15-20 minutes, with me clinging to the bike rails and hoping I don't get flung off the bike, needing yet another person to get to the emergency room! The road was so bad, that in some of the places, the biker had to go to the edge of the road to get a slightly flatter surface. And of course, there was a cliff on that side. All the while, I was just hoping that Rohaan was clinging to the biker really tight, so he does not fall off.

Once we reached the hospital, Tanka and the 3 bikers helped a lot. From talking to the medical staff to helping out in the x-ray room. Yes, we all went in the x-ray room and helped my son keep his hand straight, dry out the x-ray once it was taken and so on... They helped us in getting the medications needed and then dropped us off back home...pretty much everything. I could not be more thankful to Tanka and to the 3 strangers who stayed with us until the end.

The next day we started our 2-day journey back to Kathmandu. Back to the beautiful scenery and to the narrow, windy roads. It was awesome! My children want to go back next summer. They have made friends in the school and have promised them that they will be back soon! I hope I do go back soon as well...

Back in Kathmandu, I met with Mr. Raju Shrestha, who will help the school with the technical challenges. He has agreed to help sort out the internet issues as well as help train the teachers on computer usage. This was such a great experience and I truly appreciate the opportunity to support Q. Learning, and thank Aptitude Software for choosing me to represent our company. Wow, what an experience.

