

Friends, Family, and Vicarious Travelers,

I hope this finds you well! I had the intention of sending out some sort of letter or update once two weeks or so passed (and the rest of the group I'm with faithfully updated their blogs for the fourth or fifth time), but our packed schedule as well as a loss of internet at the Fulbright office has slowed me down a bit. What they told us in orientation is true: everything really does seem to take longer to get done here, or at least take more mental energy. A rather grizzled Brit I met at a café on my second day here offered to me by way of advice: "In Nepal, you have to take all your expectations, social, professional, romantic, personal, any expectations you have for yourself and what you're going to accomplish here...and halve them. And then halve them again." A reflection on the vagaries of life in Nepal, but I think more he was trying to warn me that as a young, ambitious college graduate things aren't necessarily going to go the way I want them to.

I'll try to describe my general setting a bit in case anyone is picturing snowcapped peaks and yaks grazing in Alpine meadows. So far, all of our time has been spent here in Kathmandu; a very 'in your face' kind of city. It's incredibly dense; although the geographic footprint of the city isn't particularly large, negotiating all the orchestrated chaos took some adjustment. Walking or riding the bus through Kathmandu's streets always leaves me feeling something between accomplished, exhausted, and claustrophobic. Culturally, I've found Kathmandu to be absolutely fascinating, especially in the way both Hinduism and Buddhism show their influence in just about everything gives the city a flavor I've never experienced before. Sacred cows roam the streets, disrupting traffic (if it was moving in the first place), so instead of beef water buffalo is the red meat of choice. The sidewalks and roadsides are dotted with small shrines with bells that those who pass by ring and the dot their foreheads with red ochre ("tikka"). Old Kathmandu is a maze of narrow streets, ancient temples, and pagodas to various Hindu deities; you can still walk down what used to be the historic trading route to Tibet. The Royal Palace sits majestically in the center of the city in an enormous, walled block (home of the Royal Family until they were massacred in 2001). Another interesting Nepali tradition is the Khumari: a girl between 5 and 7 years of age selected from one of the lower castes to be worshipped by the Hindus as a living goddess until she reaches puberty. Because she's not allowed to bleed, she is only taken out of her home once a year; last Wednesday we and tens of thousands of Nepalis turned out to see her wheeled through the labyrinth of old city in a gigantic cart made entirely of wood pulled by a valiant but struggling team of youth. It was a cultural experience to see thousands of people, as many as could conceivably fit into the square around the temple, cheering and shoving to get near what looked a bit like a gigantic version Cinderella's pumpkin; men riding on the top threw marigold petals to the outstretched arms of the faithful and others carried gigantic platters of food back and forth to a seven year old girl barely visible underneath all the royal robes.

Other aspects of life in Kathmandu are a little harder to get excited about. The guidebook puts it well, if a little dramatically, when they write: "Kathmandu is regularly paralyzed by political ferment, electricity cuts, and traffic seizures on a scale that is almost apocalyptic." Fortunately, the political situation has been merely simmering recently thanks to a total deadlock in parliament and the lack of functional constitution. The traffic, however, does seem a little out of hand. It takes me an hour plus to commute by bus a distance of what, on the map, appears to be about six kilometers (fourish miles). The best way to get around here is by motorcycle, on which a conventional two lane road can present a plethora of opportunities for the fearless driver (you can pass on the right, left, opposing lane, or either sidewalk). Also, Kathmandu is subject to what the locals call "load-shedding" or scheduled electricity cuts. Since the country runs completely on electricity generated by hydro power (at least it's green), supply is a function of how much water there is in the reservoir. Right now the monsoon has just ended and we only have two hours of load shedding a day (6PM to 8PM) but I'm told that by spring load shedding can reach 18 hours, leaving a mere 6hrs of electricity, three of which are in the middle of the night. It's certainly nothing we hardy Fulbrighters can't deal with, but given that this is the capital and by

far the most developed city in the country, it is a bit surprising to me. Most of all though, I really, really miss green things: trees, grass, flowers, parks, trees. The city is so densely built that open spaces just don't seem to exist, with the possible exception of the walled, guarded, and barbed wired American club.

The first week here we English Teaching Assistants (ETAs) spent in two apartments rented on a continuous basis by the Fulbright program. It wasn't perhaps the nicest or cleanest apartment by US standards, but it was very functional and conveniently located about a half an hour walk from the Fulbright office where we take our language lessons. There are six of us ETAs from a variety of undergrad majors: english, music, firefighting, and engineering, so we're an eclectic bunch. We've gotten to know each other well; the other ETAs are all amazingly well travelled, fun to be around, and heaven-sent when you need someone to share frustrations with. Our orientation schedule for the first three weeks has been teacher training in the morning followed by language lessons in the afternoon, with a couple day visits here and there to different schools. The language lessons and ESL teaching training has been demanding but good, and our teachers, all Nepalis, are excellent. Our language teacher has taken us after class to see festivals, Hindu shrines, and warn us of the various ways we might unintentionally offend our host families (whistling in the house, for example, accepting anything with the left hand, stepping over something, leaving a shoe on its side, touching your mouth, it's all a little frightening).

After that first week, we began our preliminary homestays for the duration of the time we're here in Kathmandu, about two weeks. In Nepal, extended families tend to live together, often spanning three or four generations, but I suspect that my arrangement is a little unconventional even by Nepali standards. My "dad", Chewan, owns the entire building and rents out the bottom two floors; the third floor is the male floor while the women live on the fourth (Chewan's wife is in their home village and I have yet to meet her.) A variety of very friendly and curious young men cycle through the house and all refer to themselves as "Chewan's brothers" or "bros" (I have been enthusiastically adopted as a younger bro). As it turns out, most of them are either cousins, distant relatives, or from the same village as Chewan. On the fourth floor are the women of the household, who I understand to be Chewan's daughter, two sisters, and one of their daughters; the women treat me extremely deferentially and rarely look at me when we interact, because of both shyness and custom, I think. The language barrier is pretty complete; they have only nominal English (none whatsoever in the case of the women, probably because they never had the opportunity to go to school) and my Nepali is painfully slow in coming, but aside from some initial awkwardness I don't think I've committed any unforgivable cultural faux pas' [yet], and the family has been nothing but friendly and welcoming. At meal times, Chewan-bro and any other 'bros' that might be there sit outside on the patio (my legs were too long for the floor seating inside) and the women bring us a meal of rice, a lentil stew, and a vegetable curry; it's always very good, and also always too much for me to eat comfortably. Though my family is Buddhist, one day Subinaa and Rukesh (my "sister" and "aunt", I suppose) brought me onto the roof to the family shrine tucked inside a one room chapel and filled with various figurines, masks, and burning candles. I understand that this mingling of Hindu and Buddhist influences is common among the smaller Nepali clans who weren't large enough to entirely retain their own traditions during historical shifts in power.

I hope this finds all of you well. I'm becoming very appreciative of the technology that makes all this international communication possible, and so far homesickness has been manageable, but odd things here and there turn up suddenly to remind me of the States: a rattling Honda motorcycle with a Harley Davidson sticker, or the Green Day ringtone on my "uncles" cell phone. It sounds as if internet access in our teaching location might be difficult, but I'll do my best to keep in touch. While my personal expectations may have been halved, my expectations for uplifting correspondence with friends and family haven't...

Much love,
-kent