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Nepal

A Sausalito resident reflects on Nepal, a tiny land with a huge heart.

BY TERI GOLDSTEIN



DAVID ALTSCHUL

WHEN I HEARD about the 7.8 earthquake last year in Kathmandu on the morning of April 25 I immediately picked up the phone and called my ground operator and photo guide to make sure they were OK. Phone lines were down. I emailed and sent text messages. Within three hours I received emails from them both saying that they and their families were fine. I would not know until days later if my guides leading trekking groups in the Solo Khumbu and Langtang regions and their groups had survived. Although the epicenter was in Gorkha, 25 kilometers northwest of Kathmandu on the road to Pokhara, the quake had wreaked havoc in Kathmandu proper, triggered an avalanche on Mount Everest and caused a landslide that destroyed Langtang village. An estimated 8,841 persons were killed, 22,309 injured, 868,000 family homes uninhabitable, 52,000 school classrooms destroyed and many locals and visitors never to be found in this land I came to love long ago.

Landlocked Nepal, located between China and India, may be small in size but is tall in stature as home to eight of the world's tallest mountains: Mount Everest (29,029 feet), Kanchenjunga (28,169 feet), Lhotse (27,939 feet), Makalu (27,765 feet), Cho Oyu (26,906 feet), Dhaulagiri (26,794 feet), Manaslu (26,781 feet) and Annapurna (26,545 feet). The Kathmandu Valley, consisting of Kathmandu, Patan, Bhaktapur and Boudhanath, is a cultural melting pot. Religion is a common bond, with the majority of Nepalese being Hindu and Buddhist. Colorful festivals are held year round and celebrated with pomp and flair. Economic hardships are a fact of life for the average city worker, who makes a monthly salary of \$150, with the cost of a one-bedroom apartment in Kathmandu being \$73. Agriculture is the main source of income for 80 percent of Nepal's people, who live outside the valley. Politically, Nepal's 240-year-old Hindu monarchy was abolished in 2008 and the land was declared a Federal Democratic Republic by an elected Constituent Assembly. Despite challenges during this government transition, the Nepalese people remain determined to stay united and work together peacefully.

My love affair with Nepal began in 1979 and has lasted 36 years. It was love at first sight. I first visited Nepal upon the suggestion of my Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Chogyam Trungpa, to help me better understand the Tibetan culture that was thriving in Boudhanath, a small community 20 minutes outside Kathmandu. Nepal had welcomed masses of refugees who fled Tibet in 1959 and granted land around Boudhanath Stupa (traditionally a mound-like structure used for meditation), one

of the largest stupas in the world, built in the 14th century, to Rinpoches (an incarnate lamas or highly respected religious teachers) so they could rebuild their monasteries that had been destroyed in their motherland. I was young, curious, adventurous and working as a journalist/travel writer in the Pacific Northwest, so off I went. What I discovered was an entire country whose people were living harmoniously amid economic challenges, making daily offerings to their many gods and goddesses — Shiva, Parvati, Padmasambhava, Bajrayogini, Lord Buddha — in gratitude for each day.

Serendipity gave me the precious gift of living 16 years in Nepal, where I combined cultural immersion with my work. Now, I own an independent travel company in Sausalito, arranging custom and small group tours specializing in Nepal. I've been thinking lately about the essence of travel and how it's not just the place we visit but the revelations and lifelong friends made along the way that complete the experience.



MANI LAMA

Although my travel writing work in Nepal included explorations of villages throughout the valley and journeys through the Himalayas, one particular adventure I had stands out. I trekked from Langtang into Helambu because I had heard this journey offered more cultural interaction than the grandiose higher-altitude trails. At first, the villagers appeared much different than the city folk, wearing more Tibetan dress instead of the customary shalwar kameez (often defined by the strings of colorful glass bead necklaces worn by Nepali women), but I soon noticed that their communal lifestyle in fact made them similar. Inner strength, humility and human kindness displayed in performing the simplest daily tasks make all Nepalese people special.

I began my sojourn in Dhunche to a cacophony of cuckoo birds and breathtaking views of Manaslu, Dorje Lakpa and Ganesh Himal. My home for the night was Lhakpa's tea lodge in Syabru.

A Tamang woman greeted me, traditionally dressed in a gray chuba with a peacock blue pangden, the marriage apron. Dinner was a choice between momos (steamed dumplings), made with a pumpkin filling, and mashed potato with a curdled yak cheese, both served with ground red chile and garlic. Lhakpa lived in the Himalayas, but her heart belonged to the world. "Before I close my eyes," she said, "I will ask the gods to bless everyone and protect trekkers along their way."

Trekking into Langtang was challenging; trails ascended steeply. I was slow, briskly passed by Sherpa porters, small burly men wearing topis (hats) and carrying wood or stones for building houses in dhokos, woven baskets that rest on their backs, each held on with a namlo, or burlap head strap. Barefoot women with sun-cracked feet carried dried yak dung in their dhokos, fuel for cooking fires. At sunset I reached the Riverside Lodge.

Karma, the caretaker, was in his early 20s, with small silver hoops adorning both ears. I thought of men his age back in the United States attending college and parties and dating. I asked him about living in Langtang. "Life here is like anywhere — sometimes good, sometimes not," he replied.

Four days later, I arrived at the shepherd hut near Gosainkunda Lake, where I met Mani Lama. We were both crossing the

still-frozen sacred lake at 3 a.m. Mani suggested we go together since I was traveling alone. After crossing the pass, we parted, I headed south into Helambu and Mani northwest.

Now, as I write this story, I can vividly remember the pristine beauty and gentle people I met on that trek. These memories comfort me because I know that since the quake, these same villagers have remained rooted in their strong community, rebuilding homes and schools the best they can, but they need help.

While the Nepali government has worked hard to repair damaged roads, clear rubble and inspect buildings for safety, no focus has been placed on directly aiding people in affected villages. Fortunately, NGOs (non-governmental organizations) have played an important role in rebuilding Nepal.

Here in Marin, many people are making a difference.



DAVID ALTSCHUL

I met with Olga Murray, founder of the Nepal Youth Foundation, and learned of its long-term goal of training 1,000 homeowners to rebuild homes. Of course rebuilding schools will also be included in the effort, because, as Olga says, “we are all about kids.” Most important, she says, people should not forget Nepal’s need just because it is off the front page. Olga has been working on behalf of Nepali youth since the 1990s, and the foundation has been recognized for having a major

impact on more than 45,000 Nepali children through education, improving health conditions and liberating them from slavery. She has recently written a memoir about the experience entitled *Olga's Promise: One Woman's Commitment to the Children of Nepal*.

Jay Tamang, founder of Nepal Freed, is rebuilding four schools in his village of Bhalche, Nuwakot. He began his NGO because of his own childhood challenge of obtaining an education, walking to and from school four hours daily and being carried over a river in a basket seat by a pulley system. Prior to the earthquake, he had raised money to build schools in Bhalche, and since last April he has focused on rebuilding them.

Back to the young man I met long ago as we crossed a sacred lake. Through his photographs, Mani brought remote Nepal to the world more than three decades ago. Now our paths cross again. I wanted to begin photo tours to Nepal, so I contacted Mani, who now leads my groups in there.

Since the earthquake, Mani has been doing relief work in the worst-hit districts such as Gorkha, Sindhupalchock and Nuwakot. Social causes are not new to the young man, who participated in a UNICEF project that raised awareness about truck stop prostitution through a photo essay exhibit. Mani knows that although it will take time, his people will work hard together to rebuild Nepal.

"We in Nepal haven't lost hope," he says, "and soon we will together rise again."

How You Can Help

These groups are all stepping up to offer aid. Contact them to see how you can assist.

Grace Foundation, gracefamilyfoundation.org

Help Nepal Photography Tour, differentperspectivetours.com/destinations/nepal-itinerary

Journey Home Foundation, journeyhomefoundation.org

Nepal Association Northern California, nepalassociation.org

Nepal Education Initiative Organization, neio.org

Nepal Freed, nepalfreed.org

Nepal Youth Foundation, nepalyouthfoundation.org