



Nepal 2024

This has been my second year leading the group and I wondered if my thoughts and feelings would be different to last year's adventure. Would I still have that excitement, amazement of our students and appreciation for all they had undertaken? Absolutely! The outright grit, determination, care, humility and respect that has been shown, every day of this journey, is astounding. The group of young adults that I have had the privilege to spend the last three weeks with are truly phenomenal and to start this off I must thank them all for allowing me to lead them on an adventure of a lifetime!



Day 2 - Land in Kathmandu, brace ourselves and go! It was an exciting start and there was no warm up, after an easy set of flights (which wasn't to be the norm for the rest of the trip) we arrived in Kathmandu, met Tulsi at the airport and strode into a hot, polluted and very exciting place. Chaos reigned on the road networks, as we drove towards the International Club, a long term residence for the Birkdale trips and this year it was on top form. The hardest part of the first day was to stay awake, so we didn't hang around, dropping off our bags, grabbing something to eat and heading straight to



Thamel. Cashmere scarves, bags, bracelets, statues, instruments, you name it and it was all there. Going to the Thamel markets is so much fun but there really isn't an easy way to explain the feeling, it just has to be experienced. The following day we were back out around Kathmandu, making a visit to the Noble School, Leprosy Colony and of course the Peace Garden School. Flower garlands, so many happy faces and such strong friendships, we were all taken aback by how much this first day seeing everyone means. Reaffirming the bonds between the communities, generating excitement for time in the schools and feeling a part of the Nepalese community. This brief snapshot is so important, as the next step is the trek.

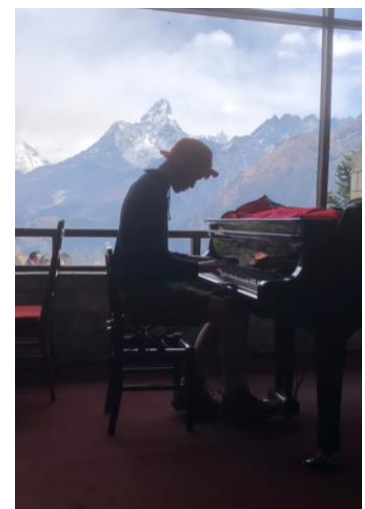
We returned to the Himalaya, aiming for Ama Dablam but with a long road to travel before reaching it. An initial 5 hour drive in the afternoon to stay at Akshit hotel, the night before flying, proved to be the first of many challenges that we faced this year. There is no taking away the beauty of the Himalayas and this trek certainly lands you in the middle of them but sometimes challenges present themselves in a range of forms. As we woke the next morning, it was evident that a few of our students had been up for much of the night, making the 4am start to get to the airport a challenge in itself. Sometimes we learn from hardship and the next couple of days was an experience that only Nepal could provide. Learning to wait, negotiate, adapt and evolve with situations is not something that can be taught in the classroom and to an extent, can only be fully experienced in a country like Nepal. Grit and determination got us on to the flight to Lukla and a healthy humour saw us start our trek.



After a night at Phakding in a comfy tea house (guest house/hostel), we were finally in the hills, or what we would call mountains, but the Nepalese think of as slight rise in gradient. A 6,000m mountain is called a peak, not a mountain in the Himalayas. Fresh air and a calmness helped to motivate the team, many of whom were now reviving themselves after a few poorly stomachs but the determination to trek and see the beautiful landscape around them was a real credit to their resilience. This is by no means an easy trek, it is long and at times hard, the steepness of some of the paths and the longevity of the entire trek are part of the appeal, and each day was well earned. The hike up the hill to Namche Bazaar was one of those days. A trekkers paradise, Namche Bazaar is a town at about 3,600m and is the gateway to the big mountains, reaching this isolated mountain town is one of the most satisfying parts of the trek.



A day's acclimatisation at Namche Bazaar, provided the opportunity for one of the trek's most unique moments. A morning hike to Everest View Hotel, where a piano was perfectly positioned, Ama Dablam set on the horizon beyond and both Duncan and Seth played for everyone at the hotel. It was magical, or splendid as Duncan would say, our guides came to watch and onlookers took time out to enjoy the music alongside the view.



Continuing away from the safety net of Namche Bazaar is hard to do but exciting at the same time. The difficult climb up to Tengboche Monastery led to our highest days at altitude, walking a high path at 4,100m before descending to Phortse Village, at this point we were up to day 5. Spending such extended amounts of time together in difficult circumstances really draws out the humanity in the team, the care and tolerance shown by all was wonderful to witness. It is one of the main reasons behind completing a longer trek, there is a tangible correlation between the duration and character development, there is no quick fix or way out and that means we all have to stick together and help each other through. Our students this year did just that.



There are so many stand out moments on the trek; Duncan and Seth playing the piano in the presence of Ama Dablam; the day I was fortunate to spend with Ashante, Eden and Chris hiking the high path to Phortse; sharing Freya, Ollie and Ashante's birthdays; mo-mo's; finding Joe and Indy bouldering at the Phortse climbing wall; even Ashton and Obi's endless conversations and so much more. Something that always comes to mind when I think of our students on the trek is the amazement of other people when they realise we are on a school trip, all of them continue to say how amazing our school must be.



It is hard to top trekking in the Himalaya, the splendour and scale of those mountains make returning to Kathmandu a challenge. However, a visit to the British Embassy definitely kept the momentum of the trip upbeat. We were very proud that for the first time our Nepalese colleagues were able to join us, showing our joint commitment between Birkdale and Nepal. The embassy provided us with a very informative programme that really gave our politics students something to think about. Deputy ambassador Luke Beaumont and his team were extremely supportive of the work being conducted by RNV Nepal and the Birkdale team. A similar visit is being planned for next year, to engage our students in international politics and to take forward the further work conducted by Birkdale and RNV Nepal.





Visiting the British Embassy was a great experience but by this point we were all eager to get into the Peace Garden School and Leprosy Colony. It was the first time Birkdale had worked in the Leprosy Colony, under the guidance of Bikash and Jyoti, but what a success. Providing a new experience for these children and helping with the softer side of education, the Nepalese children were able to speak with native English speakers through fun and games. Well done to Obi, Ruridh, Toby, Max and Seth for dividing up over different days and being the test pilots for this new venture; no easy task to have over 20 students of different ages in a room that is approximately 5m wide and 10/15m long, I'm not quite sure how you managed it!



The rest of the team were at the Peace Garden School, following the years old routines of fantastic Zumba style morning assemblies, that we all feel Mr Harris should incorporate to Birkdale morning assemblies and over excited activities, all scheduled to a bit of an ad hoc timetable. The relationship between our schools is fantastic and students from both schools were having a great time. Birkdale students attempting their very best to deliver the activities they had planned, whilst at the same time trying to harness the excitement of the classes they had been given. It is important to remember that the Peace Garden School children do extremely well in the national exams, so their level of English is often higher than our students expect, which means there has to be a lot of thinking on your feet to keep the activities rolling.

Alongside the educational activities it was the first time our students led the medical checks that have been a part of the trips for many years. This is a hugely important role to take on, these checks are effectively a triage system where any concerns raised will then lead to a child being sent to a health professional, such as a dentist or optician. Medical appointments are made by the Peace Garden School Headmaster Arjun Maharjan and any further medical treatment is paid for by RNV Nepal. It is a simple but effective strategy to help improve both education and health in this area of Kathmandu. I was particularly impressed by the Birkdale students' efficiency in leading their classes through the medical checks and the extra effort of some students that entered the medical records onto a spreadsheet at the end of the teaching days. A lot of work went into this and now the list of students that need medical attention has been sent off. Well done team.

A hugely worthwhile expedition to a far off place with so many hurdles along the way. I have been in a very privileged position to witness the growth and development of our students and the dedication and care they have shown. Thank you to:



Eden, Ruaraidh, Seth, Joe, Indy, Marios, Max, Ashante, Duncan, Freya, Imogen, Dan, Will, Ashton, Oliver, Toby and Obi.

It simply would not have been possible without Tom, Sam, Emily and Chris.

Thank you.



P.S. We lost the football match against the Peace Garden School again, they still hold the trophy. Next year!

