

Helambu Visit August 2016

1. Kathmandu to Pating

We began our journey from Kathmandu by jeep, kindly being given a lift by an engineer and his family, with 7 of us all squeezed into the vehicle. It was an uncomfortable three hour journey along muddy tracks, saturated by the monsoon rains. We spent some time trying to pass a bus that was being dug out of what resembled a small swamp by its passengers, with limited success.

Despite the obstacles, we were in Melamchipul in time for a yummy lunch of dal bhat, providing us with energy for the unexpectedly tough walk ahead. We were dropped off in Chanauti Bazaar at the bottom of a winding track, stepping out into the beating midday sun to begin our ascent with Jimmy.

The hike to Pating was slow and exhausting in the afternoon heat, the sun burning the backs of our necks and the sweat soaking our t-shirts. The only times we felt able to look up from our boots to admire the spectacular views were the occasional well-needed breaks, lying under the shade of the frustratingly sparse trees.

After three hours of seemingly endless uphill trudge, we finally reached the village, where we were rewarded with hot sweet tea at the busy construction site of the new school. Situated on a hilltop overlooking a panoramic vista, the building has two stories, each with 4 classrooms for the 260 pupils, a separate toilet block, administration buildings and an area of playground, which is currently home to the TLCs where the pupils have been learning since shortly after the earthquake.



When we visited there was no roof on either the school building or the toilet block, although we hear that the school roof will soon be in place just days after our visit, there are no stairs yet in place to the upper floor and the hole in which the septic tank will sit was still being dug. There are also plans to build a retaining wall between the new school and its former site to further ensure the safety of the structure, should another disaster like last year's occur.

This resilient building is due to be finished in October, after only 6 months of construction so the pupils can continue their education in a safe and secure learning environment.

2. Pating to Dhabsung



Revitalised after a bowl of deliciously spicy noodles in the Pating SMC chair, Ganesh Tamang, home we began the next leg of our journey to Dabchung, guided by Sancha Tamang, the chair-person of the school there, whose family would be our hosts that night. Dabchung is a village perched high on the hill opposite Pating, and for Dabchung's older

pupils the perilous walk to Pading's larger school is a daily challenge. We all fell over at least once on the steep and slippery path downhill to the swollen river, which we crossed by a quite frankly dangerous bridge.

Our legs wobbly with fatigue from the treacherous descent we took a quick break before beginning the equally arduous uphill slog to the village as darkness descended. After an hour and a half we three weary travellers were sat down and treated to tea and roasted corn straight from the fire by the locals, before the final half-hour through the village by torch-light.

Welcomed warmly by our host family and relieved to have finally reached our destination, we had a wash under the refreshingly cold outside tap and were sat down on woven bats on the clay floor around the open fire with the family, for a dinner of buff, dal bhat and raksi (a locally distilled millet drink) while we talked and laughed until our eyes were closing. We were given our own comfortable room with beds and blankets and were so glad to finally rest our weary bodies.

Early the next morning, we visited the little school to find around twenty local men already hard at work on the retaining wall below the new school. Some were doing basic labour, carrying hunks of stone on their backs who were meticulously assembling the wall from these stone slabs and sand. This wall should protect the building from landslides; we had seen the unfortunate fate of the previous school, still a pile of rubble in the middle of the village, last night.



It was great to see the local people, rather than outside contractors, working on the site. Through this building, they are learning invaluable skills that can be applied to the building of their own, and their neighbours', structurally secure houses in the village. It also creates a sense of ownership in these fathers and mothers, empowering them to ensure their children receive the education that many of them didn't.



The school's three classrooms, for children aged five to eight, were almost finished, with just partitioning between rooms and levelling out front to be completed. There was still quite a lot of work to be done on the toilet block's roof and plumbing, the playground was still being cleared of boulders, and the gate and fence are still absent.

It's hard to imagine a school in a more idyllic location. From the site there is the most spectacular view of the hills rising from the zig-zag valley below, the sparkling river snaking its way through the middle.

As we left Dabchang, we walked past the TLCs where the children were hard at work in class, with their **Mondo/HELP**-sponsored teacher. While these Temporary Learning Centres sprung up

amazingly fast after the earthquake, and have provided an excellent means of education in a time of need, they, with their tarpaulin walls and corrugated iron roofs, are by no means suitable as permanent establishments. Seeing classes here in full swing made us realise the immense importance of new, strong, secure schools being built around Helambu.



3. Dhabsung to Tartong

This walk was thankfully less strenuous and mercifully less sunny than the day before. We wove around the beautiful hills, frequently crossing cooling streams and namaste-ing our way through sleepy villages! We saw the school and plunged downhill into a forest onto a seemingly never-ending and uneasy path.



We eventually emerged at the construction site, where eight classrooms for 75 kids are spread across two buildings, on a painstakingly machine-levelled plateau. The men were currently concreting the wheelchair access ramps, and classrooms were near completion, just needing the partition walls to be put in place. There is still a lot of work to do on other elements of the complex, including the toilet block which has yet to be planned and built, and lots of debris has yet to be removed from the playground.

We were given lunch, washed down with corn beer while we met some of the teachers, who were very excited about their fantastic new school, before the last leg of our journey.

4. Tartong to Ichowk

The hills we walked through on our way to Ichowk were speckled with heaps of houses, shrines and stupas, each a devastating reminder of the earthquake. On top of this damage, the monsoon rains (through which we were walking) wash away roads and cause landslides that block the way for vehicles. We sheltered from the heaviest of the rain in goat sheds and in a monastery, which was sadly not even finished last year when it was damaged beyond repair by the disaster.



Jimmy had hoped to stop by and check on a 14 year old girl that he had sponsored, but when we arrived her uncle told us that she was no longer living there, having been married . This has worrying connotations, as girls are still often exploited and sold off from these areas, and highlighted the struggles of local girls and women in rural Nepal.

5. Ichowk

Ichok was the largest village we had visited, and we were glad to arrive at the home of our host-teacher, Aiti Tamang, where she lived with her “mum” (confusingly, Tamang for grandmother),

where we dried off and were served dinner. We loved staying here, with immaculate views down the valley from our front door, excellent food, comfortable beds, a clean bathroom, and always friendly faces as Aiti's huge family came and went throughout each day.

After Jimmy left to continue his school visits, our time here was spent teaching in the TLCs. The new school building is still in its planning stage, so the 400+ children here may be in these temporary classrooms for a while longer! Although not ideal – they are noisy and crowded – they are infinitely better than the old building, which was almost entirely destroyed last year.

We aren't teachers by background, but loved the opportunity to use our own skills to teach the children important lessons. We ran first-aid classes; first, the basics of wound-care for the whole school in the dusty playground in the sun, then some more advanced techniques for the older pupils and teachers, all of whom were keen to learn, ask questions, and practise dressing burns or bandaging snake-bites.



We also did some more general health-care teaching, particularly a very fun workshop in which Emma, with materials we carried with us from Kathmandu, made sanitary pads with the older girls. Up here, the luxuries women are used to in more developed areas are not available, and we, as medical professionals, have seen women quite unwell from the dirty rags often used during menstruation.

We spent our three evenings here planning the next day's teaching, sometimes outside our house overlooking the cloudy valley, or inside in the dark of one of the frequent powercuts, hiding from the torrential monsoon rain. It was by torchlight on one of these evenings that we prepared a first-aid manual, and put together a first-aid kit for the school, building on the rather sad one that was already here, from some simple medicines and dressings we had brought with us. Health-care in Ichowk is hard to come by as the closest clinic is over an hours walk away and so we felt it really benefitted the children and teachers to have awareness of the basics to they can treat the trivial problems themselves and know when it is important to seek help.

We were sad to leave Aiti and her family when the time came. Her uncle walked us down to Chanauti Bazar, the town the hourly bus goes from, to take us back to Kathmandu. The walk was relaxed and fairly easy having had two days rest after our tiring walk on the way there, but the bouncy bus journey itself was a five-hour exercise in balance and abdominal strength!

It was incredible to see the work that HELP and Mondo are undertaking in this area, and a privilege to be able to play a small part in it. Massive thanks to Jimmy Lama for taking us on this all-too-short adventure through this breathtakingly beautiful region of Nepal.



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18 August 2016