

NEPAL ARTICLE

If someone would have said to me a year ago that I was going to Nepal for three weeks with fellow classmates and teachers I wouldn't have believed it, simply because I never would have thought that such an opportunity would present itself. However, the opportunity did present itself, in the form of the *Mérite Jeunesse*.

For those of you who are not familiar with the *Mérite Jeunesse* Award, it is a non-competitive, international award, founded by the Duke of Edinburgh to encourage young people to develop positive skills and lifestyle habits. We participants set our own goals and record our own progress. Consisting of three different levels, bronze, silver and gold, *Mérite Jeunesse* includes a service, physical recreation, skills activity and an adventurous journey. I joined last year as a direct entry in the Gold Award with no idea of the incredible experiences and challenges ahead.

The decision to go to Nepal for our adventurous journey would never have come up if it wasn't for our award leader who grew up in the busy streets of Kathmandu. His burning enthusiasm for Nepal and all the things we could achieve there was contagious, and it didn't take long to convince us to go across the world for 3 weeks as part of our Gold Award (although it took a bit longer to convince our parents).

However, things weren't as simple as just buying a plane ticket and setting off; we had to raise the money and plan the trip ourselves. And so the months of hard work began, working towards our goal of raising 15 600€, a number that seemed impossible but we continued with the spirit of raising as much money as we possibly could. Simultaneously, we spent days planning the hiking routes we were going to do for our 4 day hike. After months of cake sales, online fundraising, and generous donations from various people and organisations, such as the Action Sans Frontières, I can proudly say that we raised 11 000€.

On the 9th of July 2017, shortly after we finished school, we set off towards Nepal, and 3 flights and 12 hours later we arrived in Nepal's capital, Kathmandu. Our award leader had warned us of a possible culture shock when arriving in Nepal but many of us took did not take it seriously because we thought we were experienced travellers and therefore immune to culture shocks. In the end, we were very wrong. Already in the coach on our way to the hotel the chaotic streets without traffic lights, the dust and pollution in the air and the unrecognisable smells were overwhelming. It was really then that we realised that we were 7000 km away from home in a country radically different from Luxembourg. However, a culture shock can also lead to a cultural discovery which is exactly what happened in Kathmandu and throughout the duration of our trip. We spent our days acclimatising and discovering the culture of Nepal by visiting grandiose temples like Boudhanath Stupa and Pashupatinath Temple where we actually witnessed a Hindu cremation from a distance. Kathmandu is a city of chaotic beauty which at first was overwhelming but after a few days became equally enchanting.

We later travelled to Nepal's second largest city Pokhara by bus on roads, which, frankly, do not deserve being called roads, and stayed at a backpackers' hotel next to Phewa Lake. We were starting our hike from Pokhara and therefore spent a couple of days preparing and buying all the material and food we needed. Our days in

Pokhara were less hectic than those in Kathmandu and Pokhara provided a well needed breeze of fresh air and beautiful boat rides on the Phewa Lake.

Finally, after months of planning and precisely one week in Nepal, it was time for our hike. With backpacks weighing up to 20kg, experienced guides and high spirits we set off from Pokhara to Dampus, then Dampus to Ghandruk, Ghandruk to Ghorepani and finally ending in Nayapul. The trek was called the Poonhill Trek and normally takes around 5-6 days but our plan was to finish it in 4 days. Our group of 13 students was split into two and sometimes walked slightly different routes, but we always stayed at the same camping sites in the evenings. I wish I could say that we completed our hike without difficulties and that the 4 days in the mountains were purely cheerful, but the reality was slightly different. With hindsight, we had greatly underestimated the challenges of the Nepalese mountains which pushed us to our physical and mental limits. However, that isn't to say that the hike was bad. With aching backs, we witnessed the breath-taking mountain peaks of Dhaulagiri, lush jungles with chirping birds, and streaming rivers with crystal clear water. Thanks to our helpful guides and constant cheering each other on we managed to come to the camp sites every evening, exhausted but proud. As an iPhone hooked, lazy teenager according to my parents, those 4 days in the Nepalese nature were an invaluable experience that made me realise that one can accomplish so much more than one thinks.

From Nayapul we got on the bus again but this time to Makaising, a small village in the Gorkha district badly damaged by the earthquake that hit Nepal in 2015, which became a place of unforgettable memories for us. As mentioned, the M^érite Jeunesse consists of a service or volunteer work which we decided to do in the form of helping out at the Shree Jana Jagriti primary school. We arrived in the village on Thursday the 20th of July and were met by the Mandala organization which we worked with on the school project. They greeted us warmly at the Gorkha Beach Resort which we stayed for one week just next to the fast flowing Trishuli river and only 2 minutes from the school.

The village project was so significant and special that it is almost hard to put into words. Our week in the school was spent teaching English, building fences, painting murals and interacting with the children. The school was in desperate need of new school materials such as white boards, computers, fans and books, and with the 11 000 € that we raised, 6500€ went towards the school. We also had the privilege of being invited to a local rice planting ceremony from which we have several pictures of us completely covered in mud, smiling with rice plants in our hands. But what made most of an impact on us was the children. Around 80 children aged 4-10 came voluntarily to the school even though they had holidays, and met us with the warmest smiles and the most contagious laughs one could imagine. Despite the language barriers we were able to communicate through playing, singing, and dancing. Although buying white boards and building fences doesn't sound like much for people like us, it meant a big change for the children and teachers of the school and hopefully we created a safer, more suitable educational environment. Seeing children with so little being so happy put a perspective to the materialistic frenzy we live in in the West, and the memory of their warm, small hands in ours is a memory that will never fade.

Our last part of the trip was a 3 day stay in the Chitwan National Park. After weeks of waking up to cockroaches in the bathrooms and sleeping in tents, the hotel in Chitwan was a little oasis of luxury in the form of proper beds and showers. Situated almost right inside the wild life national park we got to ride elephants, go on safari and just relax in the pool before heading back to Luxembourg.

The 3 weeks we spent in Nepal were, without the slightest doubt or exaggeration, one of the best weeks of my life. The weeks spent in tents waking up with leeches on our feet, playing with Nepalese children and going on ridiculously bumpy bus rides proved to be one of the most important life lessons for me so far. We came back as more independent individuals, aware of our luck in life's lottery, but also aware of a parallel reality in a third world country where privileged people like us have the opportunity to help. To conclude, our trip to Nepal was not only a part of our Mérite Jeunesse Award, it was an unforgettable experience that taught us much more about the world and life than we ever could have learned in a classroom.

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