

30/11/08

Dear all,

It's time to give you some news ! As the connection here is extremely slow, I write you from my laptop at "home" and will then send the file, if there is electricity and if the modem works, which are two conditions which are rarely fulfilled!!!!

The trek in the Himalayas was absolutely amazing although very tough. I didn't manage to go to the summit : at about 6000m, I started to suffocate so much that I decided to go down before it was too late! I don't really understand why I was like that as I didn't suffer from any other symptoms of altitude sickness: no nausea, no headache. And I even slept quite well the night before the climb! Anyway, despite I was of course quite disappointed, the summit was not necessarily the highlight of the trek. The days after were absolutely awesome with surreal landscapes, in complete wilderness: whereas the beginning of the trek was quite busy, we didn't meet many other trekkers during the few days after the summit as we took a more original and more difficult route. We stayed indeed for a few days above 5000m and it was very tiring. On top of that, we had to pass the 2<sup>nd</sup> most difficult col in Nepal, at almost 5900m. That was quite tough but surely the crasiest and probably the most beautiful part. You'll see yourselves on my pics the magnificience of the scenery ... when I will be able to put them on line! ;-)

After 15 days of tough trekking, I was happy to spend two days in a very luxurious hotel and be able to take nice hot showers, sleep in a good bed and do all my laundry in hot water, before going to Jhyanglang (the village where I'll be teaching) where I had no idea what to expect in terms of comfort (although I knew it would be quite low)....

After a very uncomfortable 6 hour bus trip on a terrible unsealed road, we arrived in Rasuwa, a province north of Kathmandu, at the tibetan border, only 100 kms away!!! Then, another 30 min walk on a steep mountainous path to arrive in Jhyanglang where what I found was beyond I could imagine! Below is a picture of the house of Hari's family who warmly welcomes me. Hari is the general secretary of Porters' Progress Nepal, the NGO fo which I work, and mainly lives in Kathmandu because of his job. However, as it's the off peak season for trekking at the moment, he could take one week off and luckily came with me here. Anyway, that would have been impossible without him as people don't speak much English so I wouldn't have been able to organise all the teaching classes myself. I will miss him when he will leave Wednesday, as he is the only one with whom I can have a decent conversation (except of course with Pierrich on the phone!).. And he knows so many things about his country, it's fascinating!



My bed (well, just a wooden board with a pillow... luckily, I have my camping mattress!) is on the first floor, in the left corner, so not really inside as there are no walls, just a roof. But everybody here sleeps “outside”!

And below is a picture of the unique room, which is an extremely basic kitchen (only a fire place and a few shelves with plates and cups) and as the same time a huge table as you eat with your hands (well, I should rather say with your right hand), while sitting on the floor. But believe it or not, the place around the fire place is slightly higher and is called the high table!!! But being a Cambridge fellow doesn't help here ;-) ... it's reserved for the elderly people, i.e. the father and the mother of Hari, and Hari's wife when she cooks. The analogy with Cambridge colleges stops here: the “table” (ie the whole floor!) is cleaned after each meal with cow dung!!!



Hari's mother and wife

There are two meals per day and they are the same morning and evening, every day of the week: rice with vegetable curry (mostly mountain spinach but sometimes (a bit too rarely for my taste!) pumpkin or potatoes with radish or beans) to start, then rice with curd and to finish, rice with fresh buffalo milk and sugar (this is my dessert!).

There is tap water in the form of a fountain which is shared by three houses, and there is electricity (well, when it works!!!), mainly used for sparse lighting (one light in the front of the house, one in the kitchen and 2 upstairs). But there are a few plugs which are never used by the family but which are useful for Hari to charge his mobile when he comes and for me to charge my laptop (although I never stop wondering when it's going to explode regarding the archaism of the electric installation!) There are turkish toilets in a little shed not far from the house (although the path to it is extremely dangerous, especially at night! If I don't fall before the end of my stay, I'll feel extremely lucky!!!) but no paper toilet. And impossible to find some (neither tissues) in the village nearby, where there are shops and the internet point. But I was saved yesterday, with a special delivery from another village!!! When I say village, don't imagine a concentration of houses like in Europe. They are spread all over the hills and the “streets” are rocky pathes, usually very steep. Local people just run in flip flops but I'm still quite slow, even with good hiking shoes, especially on the way down, at night time, after I've finished my classes!

The family is composed of Hari's parents, his wife and their three children. His parents and his wife work like hell at the moment as farmers, mainly harvesting (maize, millet), looking after their different plantations, getting the milk from their buffaloes every morning and evening, and getting

the food for their cattle (5 buffaloes and a few goats) by collecting straw and carrying it by 50 kgs on their heads (using a “namlo”) on steep mountain pathes!

Hari’s family: his lovely daughters, Manilla (7 years old) and Monica (5 years old) on the left and his parents with his 15 month old son Manes on the right.



Well, enough for today, I’ll tell you about the school tomorrow. Oh, I forgot to mention something funny so I’ll finish with that: here, I’m really a blond and white giant among a community of black dwarfs as the pic below shows it quite well ... But a less funny thing is that as a consequence, I bump my head each time I pass a door, and I can’t stand straight in many places!!!



Find the odd one out! ;-)

01/12/08

I'm just back from a day of walking in the hills to visit some other villages nearby, in which the only way to earn money is for men to be trekking porters. They are indeed in Langtang National Park, which is famous for mostly easy low altitude treks.

I can now tell that despite the appearances, my home here is actually very luxurious! Indeed, there is tap water, hard walls, floor and ceiling, and electricity which is far from being the case in most homes I've seen today which are only tiny huts, in which a whole family can live, at some distance from any water supply and of course without electricity. These people are so poor (they earn less than 15 euros per month and they have at least 4 to 6 children to feed) that they can't send their children to school. Very sad. And on top of that I could check myself that all the fuss about mountain porters which are badly treated is justified: I met one porter with his two big toes amputated and another one with the whole right hand amputated, both because of frostbite. Dreadful!

Here are now a picture of the school, which shows quite well my daily environment, and a picture from one of my classes which let you imagine the conditions in which I work!!! ;-)





I have three classes: one for mainly teenagers and adults from 6.15 to 8.15 every morning (before people go to work or to school), one for children from 4 to 5.15 in the afternoon and one evening class from 5.15 to 6.30 for teenagers who are a bit more advanced. In total, I have almost 150 registered students although only 100 have turned up the last two days. And I had to refuse about 50 students at the beginning as there was really no way to fit more people in the classroom!!! Everybody here is so eager to learn English, it's crazy! The classes take place in a classroom of Jhyanlang school, but people are coming from all the villages nearby, and I and Hari took care of the organisation.

However, during the day, I help the English teachers at the school with their grade 3, 4 and 5 students. So I'm quite busy! All the more that I teach everyday!

As I suffer from a huge cold and sore throat, I'm dead tired now, so I won't write more about my teaching experience, I'm afraid.

Tomorrow, I'll try to send this letter as I have to use Hari's USB stick before he leaves for Kathmandu again. So to conclude, I'll say that my life here is quite tough by many aspects but is fascinating by many others. The three things I love are:

- No noise at all except the murmur of the stars, the breath of the cattle and the laugh of the children
- The generosity of the people here: although they have nothing, they're happy to share this nothing
- How my students are so willing to learn.

So it's really an incredible experience!

Love from Nepal.  
Claudia

Dear all,

Here are a few anecdotes. Some of them are funny, some others rather sad.

Yesterday, as I had to go to the next village (a 15 min steep walk from my house) where there are shops and THE internet point to buy some markers for the white board and to print some texts for my students, I took that opportunity to bring some “presents” for my family: necklaces with plastic bids for the two girls, a kg of oranges for everybody and cigarettes for the father -everything for about £1. They were all very happy but at the same time very worried for me ... because I spent SO MUCH money in one day! They are so cute and innocent! It’s beautiful.

I told you in my previous letter that I was suffering from a severe cold. Yesterday, it was worse than usual so I went back to bed in the morning, after my first class. The mother gave me then some disgusting herbs to masticate ... but believe it or not, when I woke up a few hours later, I was feeling better and my nose had almost stopped running!

Two days ago, I didn’t tell you all about my walk as I was too tired, and I preferred to tell you about the school. But now I have some time to give you more details. At about lunch time, Hari and me were feeling a bit hungry and of course there are no shops and no restaurants further in the hills, from my village. There is no high school either (which means that children would have to walk at least half a day for the closest of them to go to school, which is of course impossible!). So Hari asked a few villagers but most of them did not have enough food to feed us! We finally find a family living in a more than rustic shelter as you can see on the picture.



They prepared us boiled potatoes with some chili sauce. They really have nothing, they are so poor that they can’t send their 4 children to school, they earn less than 15 euros per month (the guy is a porter for a few months per year) .... and guess what? They didn’t want us to pay for the food!!! Of course, we didn’t accept and gave us all the change we had, which was just less than 1 euro. A lot for them! And we told them: we ate for 3 rupees of potatoes, here are 65 rupees so please, use the difference for the children for school.



Hari gave them as well three good advice to fructify their land and make a bit more money: to plant apples as the soil is very good for that, to make alcohol from the wild pears which are available all around and to keep his goats more efficiently. Hari really studied all aspects to get the trekking porters of this area out of poverty: agriculture, education, health and sanitization ... He is a saint for his village and the villages nearby. Most of the good things around (like schools, one little hospital) are his work: he is collecting money from all around the world and many volunteers (teachers, doctors, ...) come to help him each year. I will donate the money I've collected (thanks to all of you who donated!) to him for a school project: there was a big landslide last year, not far from my village, and as a consequence, many people died and many people lost their houses. So there are many orphans and many very poor families. The money will therefore be used to give scholarships to these children so they can go to school and to equip the school with a computer.

In one of the village we passed, we met a very old lady (more than 80 years old) who was blind. The government has finally decided recently to help elderly disabled people and to get this financial support, these people have to submit an application and prove their identity. Fair enough. But for that, they need an ID card, which means they need an ID photo. Or tell me, how does a blind old lady get an ID photo when the closest photo center is 3 hours walk away on dangerous mountain paths? For once, my camera was not artistic but useful! I took her portrait, and then yesterday, I edited it and brought it to the photo center to have it printed. Her son is coming today to pick it up.



And here is the picture of a cute 15 year old girl. She's never been sent to school as her parents are too poor to pay for her education and she's had to help farming. And now her mother wants to marry her ASAP, but the girl doesn't want, and she's very sad. I felt very sad too ... definitely another world! ☹



And to finish with something funny: everybody here wants to know my weight ... I know that I'm a giant here, but still, it's quite surprising! And worst ... they often think that I'm about 100 kg!!!! Do I really look that big????!!! ;-)

Let me now answer a few of your questions.

About the weather: it's rather nice. Quite warm during the day (even very warm if it's completely sunny), but cool at night. So I'm usually wearing a T-shirt during the day plus a micro fleece if it's overcast, and I add a thick fleece in the evenings.

About my free time, and whether I don't get bored: well I don't have much free time!!! My timetable is the following: I wake up at 5.30, eat an omelette (yes, it was really hard for me to climb for 15 min and then teach for 2 hours without eating anything! So now, Hari's wife prepares me some eggs every morning ☺) and go to school where I teach for two hours. Then I go back home and have a proper meal (as I told you, always the same: rice, curry of vegetables, curd and milk). After that, either I prepare my lessons, or I go to internet to print some texts for my students (and to send you some news at the same time), or I go to the shop to buy notebooks and pens, or I type letters for you, or I go to school to help the teachers. School finishes at 3.20 (with a lunch break from 1 to 2 where I can get some light meal from the "canteen", that is to say a cook prepares the same meal everyday (but luckily, it's not the same as the one at home!) for the 5 teachers) and I usually start my own classes at 3.30-3.45 until 6.30. Then I go back home in the dark (pitch dark I should say!) where I have dinner. Then I stay a bit with the family, around the fire, talking in English with Hari, and with some nepali words and a lot of miming with the rest of the family, and helping with some housework (like peeling the maize for instance). And then, dead tired, I go to bed around 8.30, a bit later if I've managed to talk to Pierrick on the phone. Oh I forgot, I play as well with the two girls. They are really cute! Well, everybody in the family is cute and lovely with me. They've already told me that they want me to stay with them forever... well, I'm not sure I want to!!! ;-)

But Friday, they will put their best clothes and I will take a picture of all of them with me so they can hang it in their kitchen and thus have me with them all the time ;-)

Well, it's their request, not my suggestion!!!



Today, I received cards from two students to wish me a happy new year. I was very surprised but then realised, that indeed, we are in december, and Xmas is coming soon as well as New Year's! But nothing here can remind me of Xmas! It's very funny for me to remember that in Europe, all the main cities have now so many lights everywhere while here, everything is so dark because of a lack of lights and because of very frequent electricity cuts! I've been finishing my class for the last few days with pocket torches as electricity goes off around 5pm, and may not come back before 10 the next morning! Anyway, as one light of 40W is far from being enough for a whole classroom, my students always bring their own pocket light, so it doesn't change much to have electricity or not!

To eat everyday the same meal based on rice is as well far from the nice Alsatian culinary delicacies which are prepared during Advent and for Xmas ... although, don't worry, I'm not starving here! ;-)

This morning, the class went wrong and I left it crying from frustration and anger, feeling so useless and hopeless! I spent indeed 2 hours teaching them the present and the past tenses (by repeating the rules, making them repeat the rules and do at least 50 exercises) to see at the end "I listenS and he play"!!! I couldn't believe it! What can I do in this case? Do you think that making 100 exercises instead of 50 will really make a difference? I doubt! For the present tense, English is certainly one of the easiest language, far much easier than French for example, and than Nepali too. I shouted at them, I have to confess, asking them what else I could do so they remember! And you won't believe it, but they are students who have been studying English for at least 5-6 years, with some of them 7 hours per week! Unbelievable! The problem is that in Nepal, children never learn to think at school: they only learn to repeat and copy, and this is unfortunately the case in all subjects. So how can I, in a few weeks, teach them how to think, furthermore in an other language? Almost impossible mission! But I know, I shouldn't have shouted like that at then end, and I fear not to have many students tomorrow, as I don't think they like to be challenged like that, considering the way they are usually taught at school. They've never learnt to make their own sentences, only to repeat what the teacher says, without having any idea what it means and how a sentence works. They can't even read English on their own. It's really sad, because with so many hours per week, starting from a low age, they could almost be bilingual by then!

To calm me, Hari offered me to go to the top of the hill, from where we can have beautiful views on the Langtang Himalayan range, with peaks at 7000m. Unfortunately, byt the time we arrived, the weather was so bad that we couldn't see a thing, not even the next valley! And it was very cold! But at least, I managed to take a nice shot from the village, which may give you some idea of what I mean that I have to climb a lot (of course it doesn't look as steep on the pic as it really is!).



Back at school, it was much warmer and I was surprised that there were so much difference. But Hari told me that the top of the hill was actually at 3000m, 1000m above the village! It's funny to think that in France, until recently, climbing to 3000 was usually quite an achievement for me, and most people in France and England have never been that high, and here, I do that "just" (well it's still a 1000m climb!) by going to the top of the hill, between two classes!!! ;-)

The classes of the evening went very well, so I felt much better. The little children managed to understand the rules of conjugation after only 1 hour, so I think it's my morning students who have a problem rather than my teaching which is bad! ;-)

And the teenagers even asked for homework, what else could I hope for?! ;-)

So I came back home with a much lighter heart than this morning!

☺

05/12/08

Just quickly before going to the internet point: I had only 10 students this morning! Much worse than what I was fearing! The good side is that we worked very well, they all kept very focussed and learnt a lot. A very efficient class.

OK, this is my last long letter as Hari is leaving tomorrow, and so his stick that I'm using to transfer the files from my laptop to the computer with the web connection. I'm sorry, I don't have time to tell you about the pic session with the family, neither to include some of the pics, but it was really good fun! They really took it seriously and got their best clothes out, washed their hair, made up, ... And they dressed me in a sari ...

Much love from Nepal.  
Claudia

06/12/08

I don't know when I'll be able to send this letter as Hari left Saturday with his USB stick, but I still keep writing so I don't forget anything important! ;-)

Here are some pictures of me with the family. I really seem to come from another world, don't you think so? So much taller and bigger!



The sari which I'm wearing is actually a gift from Ahmah (Hari's mother), for me to take home so I can remember her each time I'll wear it! How sweet! It was a bit awkward for me: I know they have not much money and clothes but at the same time, I don't want to offend them. So I decided to accept and it made her so happy, that I was very glad I did so! As Hari's family has no picture of them, I did different series with just the children, just Hari and his wife, just his parents and then of course everybody. Hari took the photos with him to Kathmandu and will print them there so I can offer them to the family before I leave (Hari will indeed come back to Jhyanlang to "pick me up" and bring me back to KTM).

And here are two pictures of Manilla and Monica, that I find really too cute!



Although the way they are dressed is special for this pic session, The way they are combed is not. Children here can be quite dusty and dirty but they are always impeccably combed when they go to school (actually everyday!), with nice braids and red ribbons for the girls,. They leave as well the house usually with a clean uniform, but by the time they arrive at school ... ;-)

The neighbours, who were watching the scene with great interest, were a bit jealous because they don't have any picture of them either. So they asked me to take photos of them too, when all of them would be at home (their children were at school at that moment).

This happened this morning, and they were lucky because the weather was gorgeous (which was unfortunately not the case yesterday) with an awesome blue sky. Like Hari's family, they put on their best clothes and it was really funny to seem them dressed so nicely in this dusty environment. Indeed (I don't know if I've been clear enough on this point), houses and patios are here completely in red clay and the rest is just fields and mountain pathes so of course, you get dirty and dusty in less than 5 min.

After this pic session, I went to Jibjibe (the village where there are shops and Internet) with one of the school teachers, in order to get a red blouse to match my sari. I can tell you that me being at the tailor's shop was a big event for the village, and many villagers came to watch me! So funny! I ordered as well another top, very typical from here. They should be ready tomorrow. ☺

Time to go to school, as even if there is no school on Saturday, my students still want an English class with me! Bye bye!

07/12/08

Last night, after school, I was invited for dinner to Laxman's, the head of the school. Laxman is quite a strange person, not sure whether I can really trust him. I don't know, it's hard to explain, but I don't feel completely at ease with him. Plus his English is rather poor (although he teaches English!), so it doesn't help. I reckon he's about 40 years old, he is married and has two children, but these three leave in KTM. So he lives with his parents (which is really common here: most people live with their parents or parents in law). He picked me up at school because it's quite a long

way from the school to his place (he lives in Jibjibe, but 15 min below the Internet point, which is 15min below my house, which is 15 min below the school!) and a difficult way at night. At some point, the villagers made regular stairs with stones all along the path but because of the heavy rains during the rainy season, the stairs became progressively damaged and now it's rather erratic! On the way, we stopped at my family's place to let them know that I will not eat with them, and then Laxman told them it would be better for me to stay at his as it's a long way back home. There were really not happy about it, neither was I. I told him I preferred to go back home in the evening rather the next morning as I didn't feel walking for 45 min at 5 o'clock in the morning to go to school, especially without breakfast! But impossible to make him understand that, so I gave up arguing and decided that I would just leave after dinner, and that's it! But my family didn't give up arguing. I don't really know what was said, but it kept on going for quite a while! Even the neighbour came and took part in the discussion! It was so funny! I had the impression that I was back 15 years ago, when I had to argue with my parents to go out!!! My family here really feels responsible for me, and they are quite unhappy if I go out in the evening. They consider me indeed like their own daughter and are worried as my mother is when I'm at my parent's place. For instance, Pierrick always calls me 5 min after I finish my evening class as the network is quite good at the school where it's quite bad at home. So when he calls, I arrive 30 min later than usual. Until now, Hari could tell them so no problem. But yesterday, they didn't know (although I had asked Hari to tell them that Pierrick always calls Tuesdays, Fridays and Sundays .... obviously he had forgotten), and they got really worried ... and Bhah (Hari's father) went all the way up to the school to check what was happening! So sweet! Now, I have to make sure that this doesn't happen again as it's not nice for them. They are already worried anyway because they think I work too late and it's dangerous for me to go down when it's so dark (!!!), so no need to make things even worse! ;-)

Well, back to the original story. After a 20 min discussion, we finally left for Laxman's place, where his mother had prepared an amazing dinner. I was served the usual vegie curry and rice, but on top of that, there was some meat, some pickles and some fresh radish! And I ate at a table, with a spoon! Such a luxurious dinner!!!! And while I'm not sure what to think about Laxman, his mother is absolutely lovely so it was really an enjoyable dinner. Then we went to Laxman's room, which is quite luxurious for the village, with some chairs and lino on the floor, and many books on shelves (normal, as he's a teacher afterall). We chatted nicely, while drinking a beer (waoh!) and then, when I felt tired, I told him that I would go home. So he accompanied me for 15 min, and when we arrived at the Internet point, I told him that I was fine, because it's a way that I know very well. However, I didn't plan that there would be a scary dog on my way. I've never seen that dog during the day ... and suddenly, here it was, 50m above me, barking like hell ... As it was pitch dark, and nobody was around (everybody was already asleep at that time), I really freaked out! I started taking a detour (i.e. went out of the path and started climbing the terraces (used for cultivation)), in order to get closer to trees so I could climb on them in case the dog would attack me, and in order to get closer to some houses as well, and I picked up a big stick. But finally, I decided to shout "Namaste, Help", and after a few min, some people came out and "neutralised" the dog! Safe! I know, I was completely stupid, but I couldn't control myself! Well, I can tell you, I was really happy to be in my bed, 15 min later, and so was my family! ☺

08/12/08

Yesterday afternoon, I decided to talk to Gagan (I remind you that there is only one day off in Nepal, and it is Saturday, so there is school on Sunday!), another teacher at school, about how English is taught here. I help him at school in the afternoon (in grade 4 and grade 5), and I'm simply horrified to see what happens during the class! Usually Gagan reads a text (although I now do it while I'm here) and children repeat after him. Then he asks one student to read, and again, the

children repeat. And that a few times. And that's it! My goodness! As a result, a few students kind of know how to read (although I'm sure they don't understand much of what they're reading) and the others just repeat by ear. Gagan explained me that he's just starting doing that because he realised that in the past years, his students couldn't read. He thinks that now, at least the students who are interested can read. But two problems: first, the good students don't really read. They kind of recognise the common words, but if there is a new word, they're lost, and I'm sure they don't make any sense of what they read, because they're unable to answer the questions that are asked in their book. And it's very often that they just recognise the beginning (sometimes only the first letter!) and then guess: for example, 'everywhere' will be read as 'everybody' or worse, 'absolutely' as 'Australia' (no, I'm not kidding!!!). For the students here, words are a succession of letters but not of syllables. So when they see a new word, they will spell all the letters one by one 'a- b- s-o-l-u-t-e-l-y' but can not figure out that it gives 'ab -so -lu -te- ly'. And the same when they copy from the white board. In my class, it's a steady murmur of letters (not a single student is able to write without spelling aloud each letter!!!), but I'm sure they rarely form words in their minds and so the students have not a clue about the meaning of the sentences that they copy. So I suggested the teacher to teach them syllables. The second problem is that he leaves out the students who are not *a priori* interested, but one of the goals of school is to make them interested!!! And I'm sure they could get involved if the class was a bit more engaging. But unfortunately, one month is definitely not enough for me to make big changes, although I can notice, for instance, that by teaching teenagers to recognise syllables for a few classes, they've already improved their reading significantly.

Well, enough for this morning, I need to go to Jibjibe ... Oh by the way, the number of my students in the morning class is back to 20 😊 Apparently, many of them had to work in the fields in the last few days.

09/12/08

So yesterday morning, I went to Jibjibe, and in particular to the tailor in order to pick up my blouse and my "tsiolo". The former is alright, although much shorter (4 cm) than what I had asked, but the latter is far too small (it's a kind of little jacket that I can't close, and that is again at least 7-8 cm too short)! But what could I do? For the "tsiolo", it was 60 cents for the tailoring and 3 euros for the fabric. There was no way I could ask the tailor to redo it: I can't ask him to pay himself for a new fabric (and considering the way he works, I don't really want to pay myself for a new fabric and ask him to do it again!). And for 60 cents, I didn't feel like telling him that I don't pay him because the job is too badly done. For him, it's a lot, for me it's absolutely nothing, even if I haven't been paid for three months! So I tried to let him know that I was really unhappy, then paid and left, after he had repaired one place which was not properly sewed. And today, I've realised that there is a hole inside the lining, and that the stitches at the back of the collar are not in the middle! Oh well...

On top of that, a dozen of villagers came again to watch me trying the clothes, and some women were touching me, asking me quite aggressively how much I had paid for my jewellery, pulling on my necklaces, ... Very unpleasant! And then I needed to buy some sugar and I didn't expect it to be such a challenge! I thought that we were in wartime. Impossible to find any sugar! And do you think that somebody would help me? No, they just answered "chini chaina" (no sugar here) but they had no idea (or didn't want to tell me) in which shop I could find some. So I ended up asking all the shops of the village for sugar, with 10 people following me, but not helping at all! I finally managed to buy one kilo in the last shop!

So it was a rather unpleasant morning. Luckily, the day finished in a much nicer way. I was indeed invited at Gagan's house for dinner and they had prepared some bread! ☺ It was delicious and made me realise how much I miss French bread!!! I ate that with a veggie curry and then was served a very nice rice pudding with many spices and big pieces of coconut. I'm lucky: each time I've been invited, I got something very different from what I eat everyday. It's nice to taste other traditional dishes and overall, it's nice to have some change! This teacher is 33 (although he looks a bit older), so is his wife, and they have 5 children, the first one being 16 years old! They got indeed married when they were 14! That's very common here. Hari got married at the same age, while his wife was only 12! But it's progressively changing, and the average number of children per family is decreasing in the same time. For instance, Gagan and his wife only wanted 3 children and they relied on family planning. But unfortunately for them, it didn't work and they got twins after the first three!!! As they say, it must be a gift from God! ;-)

The five of them have almost the same name: Pratij followed by one syllable (for exemple "na" for one of the girl) so it's completely crazy! Imagine a family where the children would be called Pierre, Pierrot, Pierrette, Pierrick! Insane! But it seems quite common here: in Jibjibe, there is a family in which the children are called Sabin, Sabina, Bobin and Bobina!

And finally, Gagan explained me what I couldn't understand in my family. Although my Nepali is getting better (well, I understand basic questions and I can answer by using extensively my dictionary! Indeed, as I learnt the grammar, I can make simple sentences, in the present tense, by checking some vocabulary in my phrasebook.), I cannot understand most things. Last night, I asked why Januka was sleeping in the kitchen. After some really funny miming (I let you imagine what ...) from Ahmah, I managed to understand that it was because she had her period! But I didn't manage to understand why she has to sleep in the kitchen when she has her period. So Gagan told me that it is part of the Nepalese culture: women when they have their period are impure and so they can't sleep in their bed, they can't touch any adult man, they can't touch anything in the kitchen (except from their own plate), and that for three days. So for instance, while Januka usually washes the floor of the kitchen every morning, Ahmah did it for three days. Januka didn't cook either, she was not allowed at the high table after the meal, while everybody gathers around the fire, and at some point she even asked me to move a kitchen pot which was on her way as she was not allowed to touch it! Furthermore, when some guys came one evening, Januka let them know by a sign with her hand that they couldn't sit next to her on the straw mat! Crazy! It was as if she was suffering from plague!

Enough for tonight! I'm going to bed!

10/12/08

This morning, while I was going down from school, Hari's uncle and his wife stopped me to invite me for breakfast. It was nice because the curry was made of cauliflowers, which is was a pleasant change from the spinach! ;-)

Hari's uncle is educated (which is quite rare for his generation, and even for Hari's generation) and showed me his books, as well as some old newspapers and sheets of paper but it was impossible for me to understand what was the link between all the things he showed me, and why he showed me all of that! I have to ask Hari when he's back!

And tonight, I was invited at Goma and Tarkur's place. They are the neighbours next door and Tarkur is Hari's cousin. They are very friendly people, and I really had a great evening. Tarkur knows a little bit of English and with my little Nepali we managed to have a decent conversation! Goma cooked "shel roti" which is fried rice-flour bread shaped like thin doughnuts. Very tasty! And after that, fried potatoes! So good! ☺ They explained to me as well that Goma and Ahma were

going the next morning for a “pujah” (a ritual) in a famous temple, one day walk away. And that’s why they (because Ahmah was actually doing the same in her kitchen!) were cooking “shel roti”, so they could bring some for their trip, as the food would be very expensive there. They are very innocent people, like Hari’s parents, who’ve never been to KTM so they have absolutely no idea what a city is and even less a Western city. They were thus asking me questions like “Do you have a buffalo?” or “What vegetables do you cultivate?” and were wondering what I can possibly eat if I eat rice only once a week!!!

Well, it’s late so I’m going to sleep!

12/12/08

No students this morning! I waited for 20 min, but nobody turned up! ☹

So I have time to write about my very nice day yesterday. But before that, I will talk a bit more about my students. One class after another I realise how they know absolutely nothing! So each time, I’m teaching lower level things and now I’m back to the fundamentals: the difference between ‘to have’ and ‘to be’, and how to conjugate these two verbs in the present and past tenses! I can’t believe that I have to teach them that while they have been studying English for 5-7 years!!! And even worse, after one hour class about the matter, I still read things like “I have 15 years old” and “I am 5 brothers”. That made me feel like crying!

I really wonder what they’ve learnt for so many years. They cannot make a bloody full sentence. They just put one word after the other. I live Jhyanglang 100 km KTM ! And this could almost be considered as a good sentence as I often read things like : “The to school you 10 am” (which was supposed to be the answer to the question “When did you arrive at school this morning?”). And when they speak, it’s the same, or worse. “Pen finished! Mrs give!”

I’ve been teaching them how to use the articles (A/The for singular and -/The for plural) too but I should rather say I’ve been trying to teach them the articles as even that appeared to be an impossible task. When after 1.5 hours I read “A bananas are yellow”, I wanted to give up, sincerely (especially that it works the same in Nepali!!!). But, instead of giving up, I just tried to laugh while reading “nothing bananas are yellow”, because I had told them that there should be nothing in the front of bananas (meaning no article of course)!!!.

Yesterday, as the weather had been really gorgeous for a few days, I decided to climb again to the top of the hill in order to see the Langtang and Ganesh Himals. And this time, I succeeded, and it was indeed very nice to see one last time the giants of the Himalayas, above 7000m. As I was alone, I got lost many times, ended up in a path which had probably not been used for a few years, so it was a real adventure! And when I was about to give up to ever see these mountains, here they were, in front of me (although quite far away!). I was so happy! It was really good fun!





Not to risk to see the weather getting bad during the day like last time, I had decided to go straight after my morning class, to be sure to get good views. As there is a few days holiday at the moment, there is no school, so I've taken this opportunity to divide my groups even more to make more homogenous groups, and I'm thus teaching from 1.30 to 6.30. So I knew I wouldn't have time to go back home after my hike, before my afternoon class. Therefore I ate a noodle soup and 2 eggs at 5.45am but then, the next meal would only be in the evening at 7pm. So I had brought an apple, two oranges, a cereal bar and a few biscuits ... and I stole two radishes in a field, up the mountain! I would have been happy to pay for them, but there was nobody ☹ To be honest, I would have never thought by myself about taking vegies from a field if Hari hadn't done so in our previous walks together. When I had protested that it was bad, he had answered that people in the village and the nearby villages like him and they wouldn't mind. And indeed, we once met the owner of the field, so we told him about our petty theft: not only he didn't mind, but moreover, knowing that we liked radish, he offered us 4 huge radishes to bring home for dinner!!!

After this light lunch, I took a short nap in a grassy field and then went to school ☺.

At 4 o'clock, Bhah arrived in my class, to ask if I was not hungry! Of course, I was a bit hungry, but what could I do? He didn't bring any food, and I had no time to go home. So I don't really know why he came ... maybe just to check that I was safely back from my hike alone!

When I arrived home after school, I had the nice surprise to see Gagan waiting for me to invite me again as his wife was baking bred and he had understood how much I was craving for bred! So sweet of him! So I ate bread with a potato curry, then bred with yoghurt and then bred with milk and a bit of sugar! Almost the same as usual but with bred instead of rice ... delicious! And so it was the third meal in a row without rice, what a change!!! ;-)

I will finish with a happy note, concerning the fact how people here (at least the children!) are certainly much happier than the people in many suburbs of big cities in France and England, even if they don't have much. To give you an idea, the keyholder at school, who is as well the cook, earns 5 euros per month while he is the first one to arrive, the last one to leave, prepares tea a few times a day and lunch for the teachers, and does many other jobs during the day!!!

But they have love and communication. Indeed, parents and grand parents look very tenderly after their children and families gather in the evening and talk. No TV to spoil that, and I can tell you, children don't need all the plastic toys (they actually don't have a single toy, except for some of them a ball and a few marbles!) that our western consumer society provide to be happy and bright!

Ahmah and Goma came back last night, and it's a tradition to bring to the whole family gifts which were blessed by the gods during the "pujah", so all the family members will get luck and happiness from the gods too. Ahmah thus offered me a necklace in string (pink and gold), 2 oranges and some sweets. Goma offered me a necklace too (red and gold) and an apple.

Januka offered me last night to go with her to a "pujah" this morning, in the nearby village of Kalikasthan (where the bus from KTM stops, 30 min walk away) but I misunderstood the time, and so she left without me. I was indeed not feeling well this morning (I don't understand, I can't get rid of this bloody cold, even with the antibiotics, and since last night, I have a headache) so when she came in my room, I told her that I wanted to sleep more. It was indeed 6 o'clock and she had told me we would leave by 7am. But when I got up at 6.50am, she had already left ☹️ What a pity!

For breakfast, I was invited by my student Laxmi. She has already invited me a few times for tea. She seems to be proud to take me to her home, and her family always seems very honored by my visit! But her English is very poor (she's lovely but not a good student) and so unfortunately, we can never talk much!

This afternoon, I tried to carry on my head, with a "namlo", a load of branches which is food for buffaloes ... I was surprised to realise that it was much easier to carry on my head than what I had thought. But of course, it was a lighter (probably half maybe even less!) load than the one people usually carry here!



I tried as well to beat the millet with a huge stick ... Bloody hard and tiring! After 2 minutes, my hands were really painful and my arms sore! And they do that for hours! To get millet flour from the millet flowers is actually a long and tedious process. After having beaten the flowers for hours with a huge stick, they do a first separation by shaking a huge flat basket. Then they do a second filtering with a sieve. And when you have kilos and kilos to filter, I can tell you (because I did it for 30 min), you get really sore! At this stage, you get grains, but they still have a husk, which needs to be removed in a special machine. And finally, the grains will go to the water mill!



And then I tried to use their sickle which they use for everything: as a kitchen knife (in that case, they hold it with their left foot as you can see in the pics below) for cutting the vegies, as an axe for cutting wood in the forest, as a sickle for cutting the grass in the fields or removing the spikes from the branches which are served as food to the buffaloes, ... Well, let's say that I need some practice! ;-)



As a conclusion, I'm not really helpful here: I don't know how to cook on a fireplace (except for a BBQ, but there is no meat here!), I don't know how to wash the dishes with ashes, I can't beat the millet, I can't efficiently use their sickle, I can't carry heavy loads... I can only peel the corn, get water from the tap, go to Jibjibe to buy sugar and soap, and look after the children! So it's a bit

annoying, as I would love to help more as a compensation for the free food and the free accommodation, but unfortunately I can't. Therefore I make sure to bring little presents each time I go to Jibjibe ;-)

14/12/08

Hari came back yesterday evening and it was good to have a proper discussion again! As a result, we talked until after 10 o'clock so it was really hard to wake up at 5.30 this morning! I told him about all my "adventures" here, and he told me about his as he had had some as well. I indeed requested him to bring me some sanitary towels! It's already a difficult task for a Western guy so you can imagine what it is for a Nepalese guy while no woman here uses this kind of thing! ;-)

As he was trekking with a Western group, he actually asked a British guy for advice! And then he showed what he had bought to another client, an American girl, who told him it was good as she was using that! However, it was not good for me as it was tampons and he had bought five boxes, which are useful for at least 6 months!!! Anyway, it was kind of him, and to imagine him asking advice to his clients (one of them being a man!) is so funny that I just laughed a lot!

And then, while walking from the bus stop to Jhyanglang, his plastic bag with bananas and oranges broke .... so they fell 100m below! He was about to leave them there but then he considered the amount of money and decided to collect them .... quite a hard task as it had happened in an area of a landslide. But he succeeded and so last night, we had banana mash for dessert! ;-)

Hari told me as well that he had employed for his trek the guy who had cooked potatoes for us (with the basic shelter for house) as a porter. He talked to his clients to let them know about his poor situation ... and as a result, this guy received \$200 for tip, on top of his \$50 salary. A nice sum for 5 days! ☺

Hari went to Jibjibe early this morning to complain to the owner of the clothes shop about my "tsiolo" which was completely wrongly tailored! He is obviously an influent man as he managed to get a new one made for me, at almost no cost ☺ .

15/12/08

I got my new "tsiolo" this morning and this one fits ☺. Once more, Hari proved his cleverness by giving advice to the taylor so the "tsiolo" would look even nicer. The taylor applied Hari's suggestions on the spot and no doubt, it's much nicer ... a new design seems to be born! Hari has really clever ideas about everything, I'm really impressed!

For dinner, we were invited at Hari's best friend's place. Prem is a very nice guy, very involved as well in reducing the poverty in his village and improving the education. Nothing important to say about the dinner ... but after dinner, we went upstairs with all the neighbours to watch ... TV! I didn't particularly want to watch TV (you all know how much I hate it), but a friend of Hari and Prem was playing in a series. And it was an interesting experience! TV seems as stupid as in Europe, and probably even worse. Although I don't understand Nepali, from what I saw, I could easily guess that it was not very interesting!!! But it was fun to see their pop videos. The music is really crap, and the choreographies are tacky and kitsch ... I laughed a lot!!!

16/12/08

I was resting outside this morning as I was feeling very bad (my stomach was aching like hell!) when suddenly, Hari and some neighbours arrived ... with a sheep ... to kill! That would provide 12 kg of meat, which will be shared between a few families.

So here is a picture of the scene of the crime, with the sheep to be murdered.



And here is a picture of the killer preparing his weapon! ;-)



It was absolutely impossible for me to watch the murder, but here is a picture when most of the bad job was finished:



Januka cooked it for dinner but unfortunately, I was still feeling so bad this evening that I almost couldn't taste it. Luckily, some is left so hopefully, I can eat it tomorrow ...

20/12/08

I'm now at Delhi airport, where I have 9 hours to wait before my next flight to Brussels. That leaves me plenty of time to tell you all about what happened in the last few days!

The 17<sup>th</sup>, which was my last day in Jhyanglang, was extremely busy and full of surprises. First, my students organised a little farewell ceremony after my morning class, offering me one by one "malas" (necklaces made of fresh flowers) or "khaddas" (scarves used in buddhist ceremonies), and greeting cards. For the first time in almost a month, I was smelling good! ;-)





On the way down from school, children were waiting for me to offer me more flowers. So sweet 😊!

In the afternoon, the school teachers organised quite a big farewell party. First, the children sang and danced for me, accompanied by a round drum, called “madal”. It was very nice (but unfortunately, I didn’t have my camera with me so I can’t show you any picture) and touching. And then, the teachers offered me gorgeous “malas”, and covered my face with “simrik”, the red powder which is used in Hinduist rituals, to wish me good luck and all the best. Here is a picture back home, after my evening class, where I received some more flowers!



And then, after dinner, the villagers organised for me a cultural and festive event, in front of the house, with traditional dances and music! I had such a good time watching them and then taking part in the dance with everybody!



I really like the Nepalese traditions. 😊

The next morning (on the 18<sup>th</sup>) was rich in emotions. After breakfast, I got covered with jewellery from Hari's family and neighbours: necklaces, bracelets, hair pins and a nice "tikka" (the ornament you wear on your forehead, between the eyebrows)! So sweet! Then I offered some presents in my turn, but once more, it was a bit disconcerting (like when I offered them the gifts after my arrival). Nepalese people never say 'thank you' when they receive something (I was fighting at school for my students to say 'please' when they were asking for a new pen or notebook and to say 'thank you' when they were receiving it) and don't show much. So I have no idea whether they liked my presents or not. I just know that the blouse I had ordered for Januka is too big! 😊 I had unfortunately chosen one in her wardrobe which was too large. But while I don't know whether they were happy with my presents or not, I do know that they were very sad because I was leaving, as they really considered me as part of their family, and that's the most important thing. The rest is just cultural differences. When I get out of the house, many neighbours and children were there, waiting for me. Again, I got covered with amazingly beautiful "malas" (probably 5 kg of nice



scented fresh flowers!) and everybody put red paint and rice on my forehead to wish me “Subha Yatra” (Good trip) and good luck. And then I cried, and so did Hari’s parents and wife!



I finally left, and 5 min later, another group of people were waiting with more “malas”! I could barely walk with all that weight around my neck plus my relatively heavy backpack! Luckily, one of Hari’s sister and a neighbour helped by carrying my two other bags to the bus stop in Kalikastan, which, I remind you, is 30 min walk from Jhyanglang.



The bus trip was much nicer than last time: I was quite comfortably seated, and the weather was beautiful so we had nice views on a large range of the Himalayas, although it was quite misty. The high peaks covered by snow seemed to be floating in the sky ...



2 of my students were travelling with us, as I had decided to use some of your donations to help them see better. Their family can't indeed afford to pay them a trip to Kathmandu to visit an eye specialist, and even less to pay for glasses. As they can barely see, and that makes it very difficult for them to study at school, I had offered them to pay for everything: the return bus ticket, the accommodation and food in KTM, the visit to the doctor and then the medicine and the glasses if needed.

Again, Hari used his influence and his network to get them an appointment for the next morning (ie yesterday, the 19<sup>th</sup>), as normally, one has to arrive the day before and queues all night! And on top of that, everything was sorted in 3 hours, which is apparently incredibly fast! However, the news were not very good. One student is an albino and has therefore a vision problem, which can not be treated nor helped with glasses. The only solution is to use a special magnifying glass (but this won't help him to see the black board at school!). The good news are that his sight is stabilised, while the other student has a disease which will make his sight worse and worse, and we fear that he will be blind in a few years. However, for the moment, his sight can be improved by glasses (which will be ready tomorrow) and maybe by some medicine (he has to try a special treatment for one month ... but it is quite expensive, so I don't think he will be able to pay for more treatment even if it works). And once more (the last time however), I was disconcerted by the fact that my students didn't even say 'thank you' when they left me after the visit at the hospital! One actually didn't even say 'goodbye'! Fortunately, the other one told me that he was happy so I took that as a big 'thank you'! I don't think I will ever get used to this cultural difference!

The visit to the hospital was interesting. People are queuing everywhere, and not just in corridors. There are no private rooms but large rooms with 3 doctors in each, and people are queuing inside these rooms, while some others are examined just a few meters away! The equipment is not necessarily properly sterilised, and can be sometimes transported from one room to another, in the open air. So with so many people around, and the dust which is everywhere in KTM, I let you imagine how clean it arrives in the next room! But overall, what I saw was not as bad as I could have feared. It was not really clean, but not really dirty either. The fact that people have to queue for so long or can't have access to treatment because of their poverty is probably a more serious problem.

Before the visit to the hospital, I had my last adventure in Nepal. Hari and I had decided to go very early in the morning to a view point, Kakani, one hour bus from KTM, so I could have a last view on the Himalayas. We woke up at 5am to get the 5.30 bus. But after 1 hour wait, we were told that buses were on strike, so the long distance buses which would stop at the viewpoint were not running. However, a local bus whose final destination was Kakani was leaving at 6.45am, and so we took this one, which actually left by 7am. We then got stopped half way by the Maoist army which told us that the bus couldn't continue. However, after some discussion, they let us go and we finally arrived in Kakani just after 8am! We then walked for an hour to the viewpoint, and indeed, the view was amazing ☺.

But then, there was no bus running back to KTM ☹. We could have walked as it's a 17km hike but we would have never made it for the appointment with the eye specialist at 11am! While we were considering the different options, a big pick-up passed (not even after 5 min) and we got a lift! And it was so much fun! I was sitting on milk jars, in the middle of goats which were peeing and poohing on my shoes, trying to hold tight a transversal bar in order to stay in the truck! We were indeed jumping every 2 min as the road was terrible. Hari was standing against the back of the truck, and the guy standing next to him seemed to be worried by Hari's behavior (Hari had, according to himself, found a technique not to jump at each bump but it proved not to be that efficient!) as he was always putting his arm behind him to make sure that Hari wouldn't fall over! It was hilarious! At least for us, as no one else was laughing ... but as far as we were concerned, we really did have a good time, although I have to confess that it was quite painful for my bottom, all the more that I was already in pain because of acute diarrhea!



After the hospital, Hari took me around KTM so I could see a bit more than Thamel which is the area where I had spent most of my time before, when I was staying in the luxurious hotel. We saw very interesting old buildings and temples, and I managed to finish my Xmas shopping.





We came back home very exhausted, and extremely dusty! Hari thought that I couldn't leave the country in such a state, so he offered to heat some water in a bucket for me to take a kind of hot shower. You can imagine, I didn't decline his offer, especially that the water in KTM is not cold like in Jhyanglang, it's just purely freezing, so there was no way I would have washed myself with it (moreover that evenings are now quite cold in KTM). Oh my goodness, I can't describe ... I felt so good after it! ;-) I had been waiting for that for one month ... and I'm even more looking forward to a proper shower in my bathroom in Paris tomorrow!

After a nice French breakfast with Nepalese pear jam, this morning was dedicated to packing. It took me a while as I bought many many things ... not just for me, but many presents too! Plus all the presents I have received as well. In particular, I got an extremely nice one from Hari this morning, that I'm very happy to bring back home, although he's crazy to have bought such an expensive item (well, to have bought anything at all in fact!): a "tanka" which is a religious buddhist painting, very detailed, intricate and ornate. It's expensive because it requires hours of work!

And then, just before leaving, I had my last Nepalese traditional meal "dahl-bhat-tarkari", eating with my hands and seating on the floor! Ganu, Hari's little sister, who shares his room in KTM, had spent 2 hours preparing it, and it was very delicious!

Let me finish humoristically by using my students' words to express how a strange country Nepal is (I'm not kidding, I really read or heard the following!!!):

- Nepalese buffaloes are made of wood.
- Their tables fly in the air and their benches are on the wall.
- Nepalese windows are round and metallic, and the Nepalese eat in them.
- Nepalese bananas are red.
- The Nepalese have a blue nose.
- Nepal is in Vancouver.

And to conclude my letter, here is a list of what I will miss and not miss:

- I will miss the simplicity of the life here although I won't miss not to have a shower (I'm not even talking about a HOT shower) for one month, to take my meals sitting on the floor in a very smoky kitchen and to sleep on a wooden bed in a sleeping bag.
- I won't miss to be covered by dust and to have really dirty hands all the time although I will miss to be outside all the time, now that I've been living outside for almost 3 months!
- I will miss the sunshine: not a single drop of rain and less than 8 days of overcast weather in 7 weeks.
- I will miss the fresh buffalo milk. But I won't miss rice! I don't want to see rice in any form for at least one month!
- I will not miss to almost break my leg each time I use the steep and slippery path to the toilets, to get completely wet when I have to unplug (and then plug back) the hoses to get some water in order to fill the bucket which is used as a flush, and to run out of toilet paper because I have to wait 3 days to get some!
- I will miss the generosity and the hospitality of the people here, as well as their innocence. But I won't miss seeing people putting their finger deep into their nose while talking to me! ;-)
- I will miss the silence of the mountains and the beautiful sceneries, sunrises and sunsets.
- I will miss Hari, Januka, Ahmah, Bhah, Monica, Manilla and Manes, and their lovely neighbours, although of course, I'm extremely looking forward to see Pierrick and my family for Xmas, and later on, my friends. I cannot wait to move in with Pierrick after such a long time abroad!

I think it is important for a Westener to experience for a while the conditions in which 75% of the world live and I'm glad I had the opportunity to do it. One never really understands things until one experiences them. The living conditions here are tough but people are mostly happy and very generous. So this made me question many things about the Western way of life and realise what is really important in life. Thank you so much Hari, because without you, this amazing experience would have not been possible. Thank you so much for your time, your kindness, your knowledge and your generosity. You're very inspiring and I'm going to miss you! You became a precious friend, and I hope to be able to collaborate with you on educational programs in remote Nepal in a close future. Many thanks to your lovely family as well!

Well, time for me to board in! En route for Brussels!

I wish you all a Merry Xmas and see you in 2009, if not before!

Claudia

