

Preparation Material for Volunteers
Nepal in a Nutshell – Customs and Rules

Each country has its do's and don'ts. In Nepal they depend very much on the geography and ethnic groups you are living with or are surrounded by. They are more flexible than you would think and many of them are changing, but some will still take a lot of time. In Kathmandu Valley, where ethnic groups mix the most, there is a high degree of tolerance of different clothes and lifestyles, a fact that many tourists see but unfortunately abuse. Ethnic groups are quite parochial and foreign ways may cause offence, so it is important for you to understand Nepal's culture and etiquette. Nevertheless, many taboos relax the further and higher you go into the mountains, since Hindu behavioural are just partially shared by Buddhist and animist ethnic groups.

One simple rule is: If you are in doubt whether something is appropriate or not, do as you see Nepalis doing.

Common courtesies

Most foreigners are treated as an object of curiosity, and you may be joined in the street or on the trail by someone who just wants to chat. Nepalis will constantly be befriending you, wanting to exchange addresses, take photos, extract solemn promises that you will write to them and add you on facebook. If you don't want them to take pictures, just tell them in a nice and polite way. Unfortunately, some of them will still continue and doing it in a more hidden way.

Namaste ("I salute the god within you"), the Nepalese greeting, is one of the most attractive and addictive of Nepalese customs. It is said by holding your palms together as if you are praying. It is more used as a "how do you do?" rather than "hello!". If you want to show great respect, *namaskar* is a more formal or subservient form of the word.

Nepalis are often addressing each other in a very familiar way, therefore it is important to know what those words mean: *didi* ("older sister"), *bahini* ("younger sister"), *daai* ("older brother"), *bhaai* ("younger brother"), *buwa* ("father") and *aamaa* ("mother"). These can be slightly different according to the area you are in. To be more formal or respectful, just add *ji* to the end of someone's name, as in "*Namaste, Kamal-ji*".

Dhanyabaad is usually translated as "thank you" but is normally reserved for an act beyond the call of duty. The English "thank you" is widely understood.

Now here it gets tricky, saying "yes" and "no" can be quite difficult to change in your behaviour. To indicate agreement, tilt your head slightly to one side and then back the other way. To tell somebody "no", hold one hand up in front of you, palm forwards, and swivel your wrist subtly, as if you were adjusting a bracelet. If you are shaking your head from one side to the other, as it is the common western way it might be misunderstood as a "yes". To point at something, it is considered as rude if you are using your finger, instead you can use the chin or your thumb. Once you are in Nepal you will get used to those habits very easily and quickly.

Caste and Status

The caste system, although it has been abolished in 1963, is still very ingrained in the national psyche. Though professions are changing and "love marriage" is more popular, caste and status still determine whom most Nepalis may (or must) marry, where they can live and who they can associate with. Regarding to their beliefs, foreigners should be casteless, but in the remote far western hills they can be considered polluting to orthodox, high-caste Hindus. There are minor caste restrictions depending on where you are traveling, such as not being allowed into the kitchen of a high-caste

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Hindu home. Generally, it is mostly more respected when you are saying you have a different religion than being atheist.

The status (*ijat*) is equally important. When Nepalis meet for the first time, they usually ask each other's name, home town and profession, which helps to determine relative status and therefore the correct level of respect. Westerners tend to have a lot of status and many people will see you as fabulously wealthy and treat you as having a high status or even being in a high caste unless it is about ritual or ceremonial affairs.

Eating

Many of the taboos refer to food. One underlying principle is that once you've touched something with your lips, it is polluted (*jutho*) for everyone else. If you take a sip from someone's water bottle, try not to touch it with your lips, the same applies if it is your own. Don't eat off someone else's plate or offer anyone food you've taken a bite of and don't touch cooked food until you have bought it. Many of those rules are loosening especially with the younger generation but as long as you are in a rural environment you should follow them.

Should you be eating with your hands, use the right one only, as the left hand is reserved for washing after defecating. You can use your left hand for holding a glass or utensils while you eat, but don't wipe your mouth or pass food with it. It is also considered good manners to give and receive everything with the right hand. In order to convey respect, offer money, food or gifts with both hands, or with the right hand while the left touches the wrist or the inner of your elbow.

Clothing and the body

A vast majority of Nepalis is profoundly conservative in their attitudes to clothing. The following hints apply mainly to your dress code in temples and monasteries, but also to your clothing in villages and more rural areas.

Men should always wear a shirt in public and long trousers if possible (shorts are fine on trekking trails). For women in villages, a sari or skirt that hangs to mid-half level is traditional, although trousers are mostly accepted nowadays. Shoulders should be covered as well as your knees. Girls and Tourists in Kathmandu and Pokhara do wear shorts or short skirts, but this is relatively new and you run the risk of being seen as sexually available. Showing a lot of skin, will not just decrease your status, it will bring you a lot of attention as well as harassments and inappropriate looks. Besides that, you won't be allowed to enter many of the cultural and historical sites. Generally, looking clean shows respect and earns it. Ungroomed travelers might be treated with significantly less courtesy and respect.

Only women with babies or small children bare their breasts. When Nepali men bathe in public they will always do it in their underwear, and women in a lungi (*saron*). If you find yourself in a situation like this, it is expected to do likewise. In Nepal, the forehead is regarded as the most sacred part of the body and it's impolite to touch an adult Nepali's head. You should generally refrain from touching anybody's head, old or young. The feet are the most unclean part, so don't put yours on chairs or tables. When sitting, be careful, that you are not pointing with your soles of your feet at anyone. It's also bad manners to step over the legs of someone seated.

Male friends will often hold hands in public, sometimes girls as well, but not lovers of the opposite sex. Couples who cuddle or kiss in public will at best draw unwelcome attention. Handshaking has

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increase, but not all women will feel comfortable to shake a man's hand, stick with *namaskar* or *Namaste* as the main greeting form.

Generally, showing sexual affections, meaning holding hands, cuddling, kissing etc. is not very welcomed in public and even in familiar circles should be kept to a minimum. You should be aware that people with different gender are usually just sharing the same room if they are either family or married. If you are staying in a village and are in the same room as another volunteer of the other sex, people will most likely see you as a couple. Married women are treated with respect and sometimes it is difficult to explain and for Nepalis difficult to understand how relationships in the western world work. Always show respect for the customs in the region you are in.

Temples and Homes

Non-believers, most of the tourists, are not allowed in major Hindu temples or their innermost sanctums, since they can cause possible ritual pollution. Where you are allowed in, be respectful, take your shoes off before entering, don't take photos unless you've asked permission, and leave a few rupees in the donation box. Try not to touch offerings or shrines. Leather is usually not allowed in temple precincts.

Similar behavior rules apply to Buddhist temples and monasteries. If you are granted an audience with a lama, it is traditional to present him with a *kata* (a ceremonial white scarf, usually sold nearby). Walk around Buddhist stupas and monuments clockwise, showing them the clean and pure right side of your body, whereas the left side is supposed to be unclean, due to its purpose.

If invited for a meal in a private home, you can bring fruit or sweets, but don't expect thanks, as gifts tend to be received without a fuss. Always take off your shoes when entering. When the food is served you may be expected to eat first, so you won't be able to follow your host's lead. Women are also often eating after everybody else has finished. Take less than you can eat, asking for seconds is the best compliment you can give. The meal is typically served at the end of a gathering, when the eating is done, everyone leaves. In some households it is common that the food is served by the woman of the household and placing everything on the table, where you can take your own portion is considered rude. In all the cases, follow the example of the host or simply ask.

Sherpas and some other highland groups regard the family stove/fireplace as sacred, so don't throw rubbish or scraps into it.

Hustle and Hassle

The hustle in Nepal is more and more the same as in India. You will be confronted with it at the airport, at the major bus stations, in Thamel or the main roads in Phokara. They also cruise the tourist strips of Kathmandu, offering drugs, treks, all kinds of goods and increasingly, sex. For the most part though, they are less aggressive than in India and more annoying than harmful. The best way to deal with them is to ignore them entirely and they are likely to ignore you. If this doesn't work, most of them will leave you alone when asked nicely, which would never work in India. Don't be offended when they rush off in a harsh way.

The tourist zones are full of other lone entrepreneurs and middlemen and touts by any other name. Ticket agents, rikshaw-wallahs, guesthouse owners, trekking guides and others are usually getting a commission from the seller. Which means in consequence the prices are higher than if you would buy it directly and cut out the middleman. It also gives you more control over the transaction and what

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for your money is used. You should find, however, that a few rupees (and smiles) given to people whose services you may require again will smooth the way and make your stay more pleasant.

Generally, you should also be aware of the fact that bargaining is a substantial part of buying goods, hiring guides, renting rooms etc. It is simply part of the culture and you should never go with the first price somebody is offering you, always try to go down and do it as Nepalis are doing it. It should also be mentioned that sellers are saying a higher price from the beginning on, when they see you are a tourist. Knowing not just the local prices but also some words in Nepali will show that you are not an easy target to rip off and save you a lot of money. Moreover, prices, especially in shops in Thamel and taxis are more expensive during night times and no matter how good you are in bargaining you won't get the same price as during the day. Therefore, plan carefully when you are buying your things. A good rule, I have discovered is, divide the first price offer into 3, and then multiply it with $1\frac{1}{2}$, that should be your starting point for further discussions. Also a very good thing to have are small denominations of money since many sellers don't have or just pretend to not have enough change. When you are using buses, minivans, taxis etc. inform yourself prior how much fares cost and have it exactly, or don't ask and just hand over the money and see how much you are getting back. Observing locals can also help a lot.

Beggars

No matter where you are going in Asia you will be confronted with beggars, young or old, male or female. Although it might be hard to see that poverty at first, (unfortunately) you will probably adjust to it fairly quickly. Nonetheless, a thornier dilemma is how to cope with begging kids.

Hindus and Buddhists have a long and honorable tradition of giving to lepers, the disabled, sadhus and monks and it's a part of the society and completely normal. Unfortunately, Nepal is lacking a net which catches and supports those people who are not able to work or have no family who is taking care of them. Therefore, it is terrifyingly easy for a Nepali woman to find herself homeless and on the street, either widowed or divorced. There exist no unemployment benefits and many who can't work and have no family turn to begging or prostitution.

In the hills, sick locals will occasionally approach foreigners for medicine. Unless you are not qualified to give prescriptions you should refrain from handing out those medicines. However, before leaving the country you can donate unused medicines to the destitute through the dispensary at Kathmandu's Bir Hospital, or to the Himalayan Buddhist Meditation Centre in Kathmandu.

Children

If you are heading out the city and even in the city there will be children waiting for you, shouting "Namaste" or "hello", they will ask you questions and many will ask you for gifts, either financial or others like chocolate or a pen. Those kids are in almost all cases not orphans or beggars, they are just schoolkids who have seen too many tourists handing out little gifts. They would never ask a Nepali for money, therefore handling it as the locals would, with a firm-but-gentle *Hoina hola!* ("I don't think so!") should do its work and many of them will be embarrassed and move along. Sometimes, however, they will tag along for hours; the best defenses are a sense of humor and/or a strategic lack of engagement. Many of them are also just curious and are really interested in who you are and what you are doing; they want to practice their English, want to touch once a westerner or would like to have a picture. If you have time, why don't you give them some attention and play with them or let them show you their home. Great things can happen out of curiosity and friendliness.



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Street children, however, are a different case, watch your wallet and don't give money, since most of it is anyway not going to the children. There are other and better ways to help those kids.